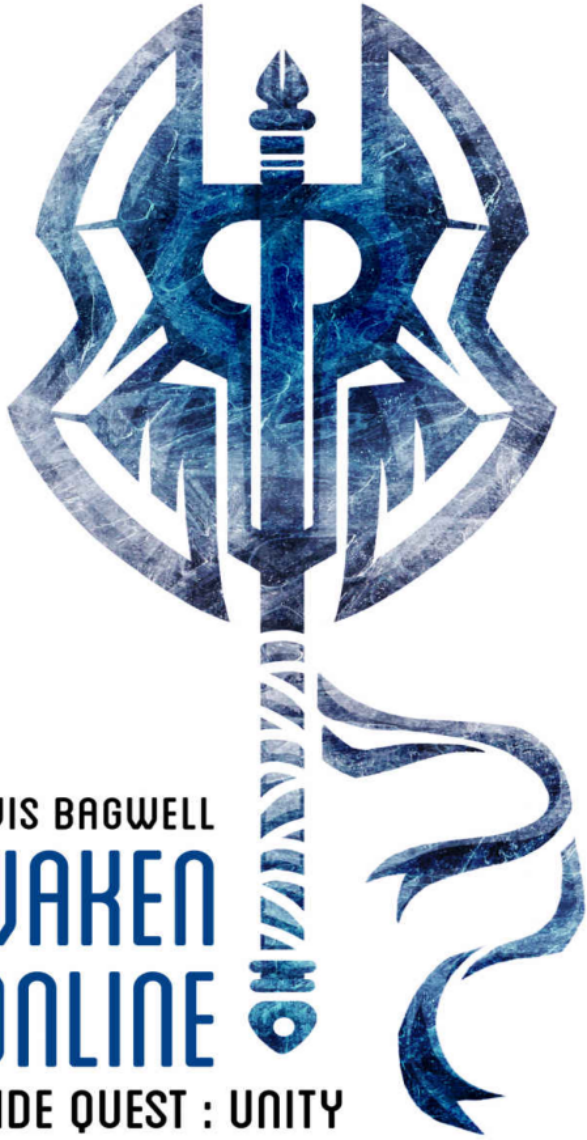


TRAVIS BAGWELL

AWAKEN ONLINE

SIDE QUEST : UNITY

Awaken Online

Side Quest: Unity

Travis Bagwell

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To my wife, for always accepting who I am.

Even if I am *really* annoying sometimes.

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Contents

Chapter 1 - Inferior
Chapter 2 - Adventurous
Chapter 3 - Frustrated
Chapter 4 - Constructive
Chapter 5 - Judged
Chapter 6 - Druidic
Chapter 7 - Enlightening
Chapter 8 - Frustrating
Chapter 9 - Observant
Chapter 10 - Frozen
Chapter 11 - Crafty
Chapter 12 - Crystalline
Chapter 13 - Leeching
Chapter 14 - Intimate
Chapter 15 - Demonic
Chapter 16 - Misleading
Chapter 17 - Broken
Chapter 18 - Recovered
Chapter 19 - Confused
Chapter 20 - Apprehensive
Chapter 21 - Sympathetic
Chapter 22 - Realistic
Chapter 23 - Sneaky
Chapter 24 - Urgent
Chapter 25 - Ready
Chapter 26 - Wounded
Chapter 27 - Beaten
Chapter 28 - Vicarious
Chapter 29 - Reflective
Chapter 30 - United
Chapter 31 - Horrific
Chapter 32 - Merciless
Chapter 33 - Worried
Chapter 34 - Alive

Chapter 35 - Bitter-Sweet
Chapter 36 - Cathartic

Chapter 1 - Inferior

Frank settled back on the couch, and the upholstery groaned under his weight. He winced at the sound, which only served to reinforce that he was in the real world. At least when he was inside Awaken Online, his bulk was a mixed blessing, offering additional strength and momentum. Here, it was just a burden.

Although, Frank *had* noticed a few lost pounds and a bit more muscle definition when he glanced at himself in the mirror that morning. He chalked it up to missing a few meals while inside the game. It seemed that he had begun staying logged in for even longer periods of time since he first started playing. Although, this didn't explain why he felt so sore when he logged out of the game. It was a puzzle.

His parents had also become strangely supportive of AO – a little uncomfortably so. They used to complain about the hours he spent sitting in front of a screen, and the many diets they had forced on him over the years had been met with mixed results. Ironically, his video game addiction now seemed to be showing steady progress, and they regularly asked him how many hours he had logged lately.

It was weird and actually kind of frustrating. What exactly had changed? He was the same person he was a few weeks ago, just a little slimmer. It was almost like they didn't see *Frank* when they looked at him.

Which begged the question: what exactly did they see?

"TV on," Frank said quietly.

The house's AI responded immediately. A display flashed into existence across the wall opposite the couch, and sound suddenly blared throughout the living room. It was still early afternoon, and his parents were at work. His sister was also mercifully absent. He vaguely recalled his parents gushing about some sort of art fair or competition. At this point, he had lost track of Rebecca's endless stream of events. He was sure she'd bring home some shiny new medal or five, and he'd have to endure another round of congratulations from his parents – along with thinly veiled comments about his own performance at school.

Frank let out a soft sigh. He needed to savor this downtime. This was one of the rare moments that he got to spend time by himself in the real world.

To be fair, he didn't begrudge his sister her achievements. He was proud of her, despite how cruel she could be at times. After all, he

knew firsthand how pushy and demanding their parents could be. The issue was that Rebecca's accomplishments always seemed to highlight his own failings. It was hard to stand in the shadow of another person's spotlight.

Even as this thought crossed his mind, he heard a faint click against the wooden floorboards. A moment later, Buddy walked into the room. The black Labrador wagged his tail as he caught sight of Frank. The dog padded over to him and gingerly jumped up on the couch beside Frank. It took Buddy a few practice runs to get the angle right with his aging hips.

"You know you aren't supposed to be on the furniture," Frank said fondly, rubbing Buddy's head and scratching behind his ears. He noted the way the hair around his mouth and nose had turned a stark gray.

"But I guess we won't tell anybody," Frank continued with a smile. The dog huffed softly and settled down beside him.

Frank continued petting Buddy as he turned his attention back to the TV. "Change the channel to Vermillion Live," he ordered.

The screen shifted. "…devastation was incredible," a man said, already halfway through his segment. The anchor was dressed casually in a t-shirt and pair of sneakers, the channel clearly trying to cater to its gamer audience.

"It's to be expected from Jason," the woman across from him answered. "For those just tuning in, only a day has passed since the native undead surrounding the Twilight Throne attacked the dark city," she explained, waving a hand at the wall behind her.

The surface rippled before transforming into a screen that showcased several images of the destruction around the Twilight Throne. The market was in ruins, debris and craters dotting the courtyard. The ground was still covered in fragments of bone and stained with the blood of the Kin. In the center of it all stood a massive bone hand, its wrist seemingly embedded in the ground. The skeletal palm was now empty. The strange silvery object – the gate piece – was nowhere to be seen.

Frank winced as he saw the image. He hadn't been logged in when Alexion's crew broke him out of his cell and stole the gate piece. Riley had given him the short version of the encounter, barely able to suppress her own anger. He knew she blamed herself for the loss, even though Frank didn't see any way she could have prevented the theft. She was just a single person. Besides, how could they have known that Alexion would use the in-game chat or that he had a freaking airship?

Regardless, *all three of them* were responsible for leaving that car-sized hunk of metal in the middle of the courtyard. At the time, it had seemed reasonable. The native undead had wiped out any

potential enemies for miles around, and there were much more significant issues that needed to be addressed. In retrospect, it had still been rather careless, and Frank suspected that Jason's troubles in the real world might have had something to do with that. He couldn't imagine the stress he was under right now.

The only upside was that most of the players didn't seem to realize that <Original Sin> had lost the gate piece or what the empty skeletal hand represented. Frank had only found rumors on the RogueNet forums about what the gate pieces looked like and where they might be located. If anyone had any real information, he suspected they were keeping it under wraps.

"As you can see, the destruction isn't limited to the market," the woman continued onscreen. "The native undead ravaged most of the city."

The image shifted, showing the southern portion of the Twilight Throne. Several buildings were half collapsed, while others showed obvious signs of the attack, with splintered beams and deep claw marks etched into the wooden siding. The walls on the southern portion of the city were in equally bad shape. Bone fragments had been piled along the fortification, creating a makeshift ramp, and deep indentations had been carved in the stone – the result of Jason's repurposed Drones, no doubt.

"We expect that it will take weeks – if not months – for the Twilight Throne to recover," she explained. "Which is good news for any players in the vicinity of the dark city. The risk posed by Jason and his undead is likely minimal right now."

"But this may be bad news for anyone unfortunate enough to have started in the undead city or anyone thinking about rolling a new undead character," the man replied with a frown. "Among the city's losses were many NPCs, including known quest givers. The death of many of the native creatures has also further weakened the already-difficult leveling in the area. New players are urged to look elsewhere – at least for now."

Frank grimaced again. This was yet another unfortunate side effect of the battle. It would take them time to repurpose the towns around the city and rebuild the nests. Morgan was supposed to be creating tiered leveling areas using the new towns, but the progress so far had been slow. Even once they got everything set up, they would likely still be battling public perception.

"Yet the question on everyone's mind is still *why*," the reporter continued. "Why did the native undead gather together and attack the Twilight Throne? Players have been posing theories for days, but few answers seem to be forthcoming, and Original Sin has been silent on the matter, refusing to answer any questions."

“There is at least one clear takeaway from the conflict,” the woman added. “Jason, his guildmates, and his soldiers are not to be trifled with.”

The image along the back wall shifted again, now showcasing video from the battle in the market. The camera angle was from the perspective of one of the undead soldiers stationed in the courtyard and Frank presumed that the company had bent some of its own rules in order to capture footage of Jason’s activities. Most of the players that had been present in the city – which hadn’t been that many to begin with – had been smart enough to get the hell out of there before the horde of ghouls arrived.

Frank saw Jason and Riley step into frame. The Regent of the Twilight Throne was clad entirely in bone, ivory plates forming a thick armor around his body. Atop his head rested a sinister helm, with pale horns that jutted into the air. His eyes were little more than sunken pits, tendrils of dark mana curling around the edges of the bone. Jason held his staff with a casual grace. Although Frank couldn’t make out the detail from this distance, he knew that intricate runes were carved in the weapon’s surface.

While Jason might have struck an imposing figure, Riley wasn’t exactly all smiles and rainbows either. She was robed in black leather tinged with streaks of crimson, and her blonde hair was hidden by a dark hood. The crystalline bow in her hands pulsed with a dull red light, creating a steady rhythm that reminded Frank of a heartbeat. However, it was her eyes that were the most disconcerting. They were solid black, punctuated only by a thin circle of red where her pupils might have been.

The overall effect gave the impression that she was sizing up her enemy in her crosshairs.

Suddenly, the western barricade behind the pair blew apart, showering the area in fragments of wood. A cloud of dust billowed into the courtyard and briefly obscured the area. As the debris began to clear, Frank could make out a hulking monstrosity amid the ruined fortification. Its body was stitched together in a patchwork of broken, decayed flesh – arms and limbs attached at awkward, almost-haphazard angles. Beside this monstrosity stood Thorn’s slender frame and Morgan’s robe-covered body.

Jason and Riley appeared to speak with Thorn and Morgan, although the camera didn’t pick up the dialogue. Frank’s eyes were riveted on Thorn’s grizzled face. Memories of his own death at the man’s hands flashed through his mind. He wished he could have heard what the group had said.

The moment ended abruptly, and several things happened at once – the movements difficult to follow onscreen amid the chaos.

Grunt's hulking form rushed into the scene, blocking a blast of dark energy from Morgan before barreling into the abomination blocking the western road. The pair promptly slammed into a nearby building, causing the entire structure to shudder and begin to collapse. Jerry's floppy hat also made an appearance as the rogue sprinted toward Morgan and the pair squared off.

Yet the camera's attention remained fixed on Jason and Riley. They faced Thorn, whose body was riddled with gray bandages. He held no weapons, although Frank knew that he didn't need any. This seemingly innocuous one-eyed man was perhaps the most powerful enemy they had ever faced. Frank had experienced this firsthand. This Scion of the Order was a living, breathing weapon.

The trio stood staring at each other for a heartbeat. Then they *moved*.

Frank had already seen the video several times, and the playback had been intentionally slowed down, but he still had difficulty tracking their movements. Riley and Jason were a whirlwind, their limbs practically blurring as they launched an endless barrage of blows. They worked together seamlessly, encircling Thorn and keeping him on the defensive. After his time spent with Vera, Frank noted how precise and controlled their attacks were. They wasted no unnecessary energy as they stabbed and dodged and sidestepped.

Despite their undeniable strength, Thorn soon overpowered the pair, sending Jason flying away with a blast of dark energy from his palm before turning to face Riley. Frank knew what would happen next, and he muted the video with a short command, rubbing at his eyes to blot out the image onscreen.

He knew how this ended. He had watched it many times and had read the comments on the dozens of videos that had been posted and reposted online. They broke down into two camps: most raving about Jason's and Riley's strength, while others complained about the imbalance inherent in the game.

Frank had a different takeaway.

He looked up to see Jason facing off against Thorn once more, this time his body empowered by Riley's sacrifice – wings of unholy energy drifting away from his back. His now ravaged bone armor had been chipped and torn, but an aura of dark mana swirled around him in a vortex. He looked like a dark god.

Jason also looked like he was entirely out of Frank's league.

And *there* it was.

In just a few short weeks in-game, his friends had outpaced him. Frank had barely conquered the outlying villages, hadn't participated in the Keeper challenges, had lost a full division of the

Kin facing off against Alexion's forces, and had, only through a fluke of luck, managed to secure the gate piece – which they had promptly lost. The only real thing he had to show for his actions in-game lately was claiming the nearby towns, although many had been empty. Also, he suspected that Vera could have handled that task on her own and hadn't even needed him.

It was partly his fault, though. He had volunteered to leave the Twilight Throne, and he knew why. It had been fear. He hadn't wanted to face Thorn again – not after the man had cleaned the floor with him.

Frank felt weak. Correction, he *was* weak. At least compared to his friends. Even before they had undergone the Keeper challenges, his skills hadn't been as useful or flexible as theirs. He had no doubt that in a one-on-one fight, he would surely lose.

He had no right to call himself the left hand of the Twilight Throne.

A loud bang interrupted Frank's morose thoughts, as the front door slammed shut. He looked up sharply as his sister Rebecca stalked into the living room. She had just started high school that fall, and she wore Richmond's uniform, the familiar crest emblazoned on her jacket. What caught Frank's attention, however, was the angry cloud that seemed to hover around her and the way her mouth was twisted into a scowl.

As she caught sight of Frank on the couch, Rebecca's eyes flashed. "What the hell are you staring at?" she demanded sharply.

"Nothing," Frank replied hesitantly, taken aback.

"Is that right?" she snapped, seeming to focus her rage on Frank. "Nothing?"

He really wasn't sure how to answer her question without making the situation worse. Rebecca was clearly upset, but he didn't know why. Asking her wasn't likely to improve her mood, so he just kept his mouth shut.

"What, you can't even bother to answer now?" Rebecca glanced at the screen, noting the video of Jason still playing in the background. "Why are you so fucking useless? I mean, it's bad enough that you are the fat family-reject, but you can't even do shit in your stupid fantasy world."

She stabbed a finger at him. "You know what? Maybe it's time you just accepted the inevitable. Maybe you just *suck*."

Frank could only stare back at her. They had had their fair share of fights over the years, but this was different. He had rarely seen her this angry. The last time was when his brother had accidentally ruined one of her paintings.

He expected the familiar anger and rage he felt in-game to

bubble up inside him. Something that would give him the strength to reject what she was saying. Shouldn't he tell her to go screw herself or storm off? Instead, a small voice inside him simply agreed with her. Her words echoed exactly what he had been thinking for weeks now.

So instead he grimaced, closing his eyes and balling his hands into fists. Frank heard an irritated huff from Rebecca. "Look at you. You can't even fight back."

Then Frank heard her shoes tapping against the floor as she stormed away. When he opened his eyes again, she was gone. He was once again sitting alone in the living room, Buddy nestled against his side. The dog had raised his head sleepily when Rebecca came in and now looked at Frank with what he interpreted as a confused expression.

Frank didn't have any answers for him. He slowly stroked Buddy's head, trying to will away the frustrated moisture he could feel accumulating at the corners of his eyes. His vision slightly blurry, he focused again on the screen on the far wall. The logo for AO was emblazoned across the screen as the show cut to a commercial break.

Why couldn't he stand up for himself? Maybe Rebecca was right. Maybe he really was just a third wheel – both here and in the virtual world.

Maybe he really was useless.

Chapter 2 - Adventurous

Frank trod down the streets of the Twilight Throne, dark buildings looming on either side of the road. The windows seemed to stare at him, their gazes empty and vacant. Only the occasional swinging lantern cast an eerie green light upon the street.

He had barely passed anyone as he walked through the city. Most of the undead were still nervous after the recent attack, and those brave enough to leave the safety of the keep had volunteered to help repair the city and clean up the destruction the ghouls had caused – which meant that they were primarily clustered around the market and the southern wall.

Up ahead, Frank saw a group of soldiers heading toward him. The Kin marched down the center of the road – their dark mail making them easy to identify. They gave Frank a curt nod as they passed, recognizing his burly form and the axes swinging at his waist. Vera and Jason had instituted these patrols to both clean up any lingering ghouls that had hidden within the city and as a show of strength. Right now, morale was a problem, and any sense of safety they could impart to their residents would help return things to normal.

Or at least whatever "normal" looks like for us, Frank thought with dry amusement.

He soon saw his destination in the distance, a mound of gray dirt that loomed over the northern quarter of the city. Jason had only briefly described The Grove. It was a large complex of caverns that Eliza and Cecil had built beneath the city to grow herbs and brew the potions that they now sold on the player market. Frank had never seen the caverns for himself though, and with nothing else to occupy his time, he had decided to make a visit.

He traversed the tunnels below the mound, making his way down a winding path that eventually terminated in a solid steel door. Frank rapped his knuckles against the surface and was rewarded with a harsh screech of scraping metal as the peephole slid to the side. A pair of white eyes peered out at him.

"It's Frank," he grunted.

The peephole slid shut with an abrupt bang, and he heard the whirr and clank of gears as the deadbolts slid out of place. The door soon crept open, and Frank edged through the crack, once again conscious of his own bulk as he was forced to suck in a deep lungful of air to make it through the slender space.

On the other side of the doorway, Frank was greeted by a full contingent of Kin, arrows nocked and leveled at his position. A row of soldiers stood in front of the archers and slid their swords from their scabbards.

"He's okay," someone barked from behind the soldiers, and Frank saw a small figure wind through their ranks. "Stand down."

Cecil's bearded face soon appeared among the soldiers, glaring at the Kin who towered above him. He offered Frank a hand in greeting. "Hey, there," the engineer said curtly. "We weren't expecting a visit. Is there something I can help you with?"

Frank shrugged his shoulders. He had been hoping to pose that question himself. He had logged in after the exchange with his sister, hoping for a distraction – or at least something that would make him feel productive. His hopes had soon been dashed. Vera had taken over the defense of the city, Grunt and Jerry were handling construction, and Jason had been off doing his own thing – whatever that was.

He'd struck out with Riley too. She hadn't been on much lately, which was strange. Frank could only assume she was dealing with something in the real world.

Either way, he was left feeling…

He wasn't willing to finish that thought. His sister's words still echoed in his mind – taunting him.

"Uh, I just wanted to see the place for myself," Frank finally replied, realizing that he hadn't responded to Cecil's simple question.

The engineer raised a lone eyebrow, skepticism written across his face as he picked up on Frank's foul mood. "Ahh, well here it is!" he said before gesturing theatrically at the cavern behind him. "Our little slice of underground paradise."

Now that the soldiers had relinquished their positions and moved back to lounge near the doorway, Frank had an unimpeded view of the cavern. It stretched on for at least a hundred yards, and dozens of floating orbs hovered near the ceiling, illuminating the length of the cave.

Jason had described The Grove as little more than a big dirt patch, but that certainly wasn't the case now. The entrance dipped down into a ramp that led into verdant green fields filled with an assortment of alien vegetation of all shapes and colors. They ranged from spindly gray plants covered in razor-sharp thorns to what looked like tropical flowers – the bulbs shining bright pink.

"It's starting to come together," Cecil commented, noting Frank's stunned reaction. "Anyway, if you don't need anything, then I need to get back to work. We're expanding the complex and creating ancillary caverns."

He grimaced. "Although, the stability of the cavern is becoming

an issue – especially since Eliza is demanding that the rooms be able to support a much higher temperature. She wants to embed fire crystals in the floor! Can you believe that? It's just a mess if you ask me." Cecil was almost muttering to himself at this last part, glancing at the back of the cave as he spoke.

The engineer did a double take, as though recalling that Frank was still standing there. "Anyway, if you want to talk to Eliza, she's back in her lab on the north side of the cave."

Cecil moved to walk away before stopping and sparing one final look at Frank. "Oh, and be careful with the plants. They're meaner than they look."

"Uh, okay. Thanks," Frank murmured, confused.

His feet carried him through the fields as he inspected the vegetation. He had no idea how Eliza had managed to grow all of this so quickly. Only a few short weeks had passed in game, but she had nearly filled the entire cavern. Although, after more than one plant tried to grab him or impale him with its thorns, he became less impressed and more concerned for his own health – moving much more swiftly through the field.

Only a few minutes later, Frank found himself in an adjacent cavern. He froze in the doorway. What he'd seen in the fields had been a shock, but what he witnessed inside Eliza's laboratory was enough to temporarily reset his brain.

The entire side of the rectangular cave was filled with a skeletal monstrosity that moved and shifted in an unholy rhythm. Bone and bands of dark energy were bound together into a mechanism so complicated that he was having trouble understanding what he was looking at. After a moment, he noticed Eliza standing beside the contraption, feeding a tincture into an open ivory valve.

"W-what is this?" Frank asked, raising his voice to be heard over the whir and thump of the machine.

Eliza jumped slightly, nearly dropping the vial in her hands. Frank couldn't help but notice the initials "AE" emblazoned on the side, likely denoting their new company – Avarice_Enterprises. Eliza clearly hadn't heard him enter over all the noise, but her expression softened as she saw that it was just Frank. "Ahh, hi, Frank."

The water mage pushed at her glasses with a finger before returning to her task. "Jason and I built a… well, a *factory,* I guess you could call it. We automated most of the potion-making process, at least as it applies to healing potions."

Frank shook his head in astonishment. *They built this?*

Jason hadn't gone into much detail regarding *how* they were manufacturing the potions so quickly, and Frank hadn't thought to ask. The thing standing in front of him was a marvel, and he could

only imagine the reaction of the other players if this went public. They had found a way to completely circumvent the game's crafting restrictions! However, his awe soon gave way to a familiar gloom. Not only had Riley and Jason turned into a fighting powerhouse, but Eliza had also helped Jason invent some sort of factory?

What had he accomplished that could compare to this?

"Are you alright?" Eliza asked, and Frank suddenly realized that she was staring at him, the now-empty vial resting lazily in her hand.

"Yeah, I'm…" Frank had been about to brush off Eliza's question, but he hesitated as he saw her look away shyly. He didn't know much about Eliza, but he felt like they had something in common – they tended to play more of a support role to the others. Maybe she would understand what he was going through, at least a little.

"You know what? No, I'm not alright," Frank finally replied with a heavy sigh.

Eliza cocked her head to the side, meeting his eyes. "Hmm, do you want to talk about it?" she offered tentatively.

"I'm not really sure where to start," Frank muttered. "I guess… I guess I just feel like I don't have anything to do. Like I haven't accomplished anything lately."

Eliza bit at her lip and moved back toward the lab benches on the other side of the room, where the noise from the skeletal machinery was less overpowering. She placed the vial on a rack on a nearby table and proceeded to place a stopper in the vessel. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Didn't you conquer the towns and retrieve the gate piece?"

"Sure, but now the gate piece is gone, and I'm left here with nothing to do," Frank muttered, sinking down onto a nearby stool. The wooden material let out a faint cracking sound as he settled his full weight on it. Why did all furniture hate him?

"It just feels like everyone else has a role except me," Frank continued. "Like you have your potions and that thing," he said, gesturing at the skeletal machinery. "Vera leads the troops. Jerry and Grunt have the construction handled. What's *my* thing?"

"I think you might be downplaying your contributions," Eliza offered tentatively. "Yes, we lost the gate piece, and Alexion got away, but that wasn't your fault. We wouldn't have had them in the first place if not for you."

She bit at her lip. "I mean, do you blame Riley for not stopping Alexion?"

"Of course not," Frank replied quickly.

"Well, then I'm not sure you should blame yourself," she

offered, raising an eyebrow.

Frank grimaced. He couldn't really argue with that logic, so he shifted gears. "That still doesn't change the fact that I don't have anything to do."

Eliza's brow furrowed in thought and then she seemed to brighten. "What about working on guild recruitment? You came up with some great ideas at our last meeting for encouraging new recruits to join Original Sin."

Frank grunted. "Except that I need to wait on Morgan to rebuild the nests first," he replied. "Besides, the city is still mostly in ruins, and you need to set up your supply lines with the Sea's Edge to scale up your manufacturing operation – that way we have the money to offer free potions and equipment to our recruits. There's no point in ramping up guild recruitment if we have nothing to offer right now."

"Well, I guess that's fair," Eliza murmured, her gaze drifting to one to the nearby lab tables.

The pair lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, and Frank let out a heavy sigh. As the moment lengthened and stretched, he began to feel a little embarrassed. He wasn't sure why he was confiding in Eliza about this. Maybe he had been a little off the mark. Normally, he would have talked to Jason, but his friend had been so distant lately. Frank knew that was reasonable, especially with everything going on with the CPSC hearing and his fledgling relationship with Riley. Still, it stung. He had begun to feel like an awkward third wheel.

He shook his head. Maybe the answer was that he didn't have anyone else to turn to. Although, that didn't make him feel any better.

"You know," Eliza said quietly, breaking the silence. "When I'm feeling down or overwhelmed, I like to work in my garden. It's a chance to just get away from everything."

She saw Frank look at her in surprise and she blushed, her cheeks turning rosy. Eliza quickly looked away. "That's actually part of why I started playing AO," she continued in a low voice. "My parents put a lot of pressure on me. I guess I just needed a release. Working in Alma's garden was relaxing. It was easy work – mechanical and simple – and I didn't need to deal with other people's expectations."

Eliza bit at her lip. "I guess what I'm saying is that maybe you should find something in the game that is fun for you. You seem very concerned about what everybody else is doing – or what you *should* be doing. But what do you *want* to do?"

Frank stared at her, his mouth opening to answer. Then he hesitated. He suddenly wasn't certain what he had been about to say. Ever since he had started playing, he had been focused on catching up with Jason. Or helping to build up the city and complete Jason's

quests. In a way, he had been focused almost solely on his friend – content to take his instructions instead of acting on his own.

What did he want?

That question circled in his mind.

His thoughts landed on the image of Jason facing off against Thorn. His friend's body had been clad in ivory plate mail, and practically every inch of him had radiated dark energy, wings of mana forming along his back. In his hand, he had held a staff, a blade of darkness slicing away from the tip. He had looked like a badass.

If Frank were being honest with himself, he wanted *that*. He wanted to feel powerful – confident. However, even as the thought crossed his mind, he immediately discarded it. Riley and Jason were in a different league now, and he was skeptical that he could ever really catch up.

"I-I don't know," Frank finally murmured.

"Hmm. Then maybe you need to leave the Twilight Throne for a bit," Eliza suggested gently. Her eyes clouded as she recalled some unknown memory, a strange mixture of emotion in her eyes – a combination of pain and hope that made him wonder what her path through this game had been like. He had never thought to ask before. "I know this might sound strange – especially coming from me – but you might be surprised by what you find out there," she continued, meeting Frank's eyes.

"Or, knowing my luck, I could find someone worse than the Hippie," he said with a faint grin.

Eliza matched his smile. "I'm not sure that's possible. Besides, say what you want about the Hippie, he does attract a certain amount of chaos – or cause it, I suppose. But there's never a dull moment when he's around."

The water mage glanced to the side, and her eyes widened. "Oh shit," she muttered as she grabbed her bag and began stuffing vials and books into it. "Hey, I'm sorry to do this, but I was supposed to meet Vera by the gate 15 minutes ago. We're preparing the caravan to head to the Sea's Edge."

She stepped toward the entrance of the cavern and hesitated. "Think about what I said. Maybe you just need an adventure of your own."

And then she was gone.

Frank sat in the cavern by himself, listening to the rhythmic whir and thump of the skeletal machinery nearby. He sensed some truth in Eliza's advice, and a war was now raging in his mind. A part of him recoiled at the idea of going off on his own. Before meeting up with Jason, the simplest things had been a struggle. Even now, he could barely hold his own. The image of the ground littered with dead

Kin was still fresh in his mind. Alexion had killed the entire division of Kin that he had led – men and women who had been following *his* orders. And Frank had been too weak to save them.

Regardless, a spark of hope bloomed in his chest. *Maybe this time, things will be different*, it whispered. He would be alone, and the stakes would be lower.

How much trouble could he really cause by himself?

Chapter 3 - Frustrated

"This has to be the worst adventure ever," Frank grumbled to himself as another lifeless branch scraped against his arm, breaking through his skin and leaving a thin trail of blood in its wake.

He broke through the brush, stopping to lean against a dead tree to let his stamina regenerate. The typical dark cloud cover had slowly begun to thin during his journey and faint rays of light now filtered through the clouds.

Frank had been tracing the forest's edge and heading steadily to the northwest. As he traveled, the lifeless forest had gradually transitioned to some sort of no man's land between the undead kingdom and normal vegetation. Trees – real trees – lingered only a few dozen feet away, their branches coated in thick green pine needles. In the distance, he could make out the outline of the snowcapped mountains that rested along the Twilight Throne's northern border.

With a swipe of his hand, Frank brought up his map.

A display appeared in the corner of his vision, showing the area around the Twilight Throne. An irregular black halo emanated from the dark city to indicate its radius of influence. A lone green dot marked his location. Frank was currently standing in the northwest corner of the undead empire and far to the west of Peccavi. As far as he knew, this area was deserted. No towns were located nearby.

"What the hell was I thinking?" he muttered.

His plan had seemed like a good idea when he left and he hadn't given himself time to second-guess it. Frank figured he could at least use this downtime to train his shapeshifting abilities. However, flesh-and-blood creatures were in rather short supply around the Twilight Throne. His best option was to leave the area around the city. Regular animals also tended to avoid major roads and cities, and so he had picked the region's least-populated border far to the north of the Twilight Throne.

Now he was staring at the barren wilderness and realizing that he wasn't certain how he planned to track and hunt the creatures that lived in the mountains. That was putting aside the fact that he had no idea what actually lived in this area. Frank had always leaned on Riley's *Tracking* and *Perception* skills in the past – or the other Kin to help scout for him. However, those weren't viable options right now.

With a sigh and another flick of his wrist, Frank pulled up his Character Status screen.

Character Status

Affinities

He knew he was at least forty levels behind Jason at this point. His friend had started far ahead of him, and despite the slowing experience gain, the battle with the feral ghouls had only widened Jason's lead. Frank consoled himself with the fact that he was still much further ahead than most of the players based on the online leaderboards – although, that was due in large part to his friends and their unenviable ability to attract trouble.

Frank had allocated the majority of his points into *Vitality* and *Endurance*. He was the group's unofficial tank, and so these had seemed like the most important stats to prioritize. He also seemed to get more health and regeneration per point of *Vitality*. With Riley's and Eliza's healing abilities, his goal had been to stay up and fighting for as long as possible. His shapeshifting offered sizable buffs to his *Strength* and *Dexterity*, allowing him to compensate by placing fewer points in those categories.

He flicked away the character screen and turned to survey the nearby area. Frank knew he was just stalling. He needed to get on with it already.

With another sigh, he shifted his legs, and his knees inverted with a brief flash of pain. Thick hair sprung from his skin, causing the flesh to itch like crazy. He resisted the urge to bend down and scratch

himself – he knew it would only make it worse. Instead, he started off at a lazy run, heading even farther north.

The next few minutes passed by quickly, the landscape shedding the gray, dusty atmosphere of the Twilight Throne and transitioning to a lush environment. Green plants now sprouted all around Frank and the trees towered overhead, filtering the sunlight that shone down through their branches.

He saw the stream before he heard it, the water gurgling in the distance, and he shifted course slightly. If he was looking for prey, then that might be a good place to start. Animals were attracted to water, right? That whole needing to drink thing…

Frank broke through the trees an instant later and was greeted by the view of a river. The water flowed down from the mountains, likely the result of runoff from the snow-covered peaks in the distance. The stream was nearly thirty feet across but looked rather shallow. He could clearly make out the riverbed through the water.

What caught his attention, however, was a familiar black form perched on a stone in the center of the river. A pair of feline eyes flashed in the sunlight. He stood in shock for a moment before rubbing at his eyes. When he looked back up, the cat was gone.

"Was that Onyx?" he muttered to himself, stalking toward the river, and searching the area carefully. Yet there was no sign of the cat. Why would Jason's pet be out here in the middle of nowhere?

Maybe I'm just going crazy?

Distracted, Frank hadn't been watching where he was walking. Which was why his next footstep landed with a soft squelching sound, and he felt something warm trickle between his furry toes. Frank looked down and let out a disgusted snort.

"What the hell?"

He had stepped in a steaming pile of shit. Like, literally *steaming* – tendrils of vapor visible in the crisp morning air.

"This is just fucking perfect," Frank shouted, his fraying patience finally snapping. He proceeded to stomp toward the river to clean off his foot, cursing and shouting.

"This was supposed to be an adventure. Where the hell are the dragons? The maze-like dungeons and mountains of loot? My *action-packed romp* has been filled entirely with boring hours of running. If I wanted an exercise simulator, I'd have joined a damn gym!"

He kicked at the rocks along the river bank, trying to scrape the refuse off his foot. "Then we have the shit icing on this crap cake right here! What a perfect fucking day!" When he wasn't able to get rid of the filth on his foot, Frank stepped into the river, the water so cold it almost felt hot on his skin.

"Oh, and this river is cold as hell! But of course, it is!

“What now, world?” he shouted at the surrounding forest, his tone accusing. “What are you going to throw at me next? Maybe some light hiking? Maybe I’ll fall down a ravine, break my leg, and get trapped out here? Oh, wait, I’ve got it! How about a big steaming pile of *nothing*?”

His voice echoed along the riverbank. As several long seconds ticked past, he heard only silence in response. The universe apparently deciding that it was going to keep its mouth firmly shut. Frank let out an irritated huff before turning his attention back to his foot. He wasn’t certain he had really expected a response.

As soon as Frank managed to get most of the filth off his foot, he heard something rustle the bushes along the side of the riverbank, coming from the same direction he had been traveling. He glanced up sharply, his hand dropping to one of the axes at his belt as he slowly undid the loop holding it in place. The bushes suddenly jerked, and he saw a nearby tree tremble.

Shit. Whatever was coming was big.

He didn’t have to wait long to find out what it was.

A massive bear emerged from the bushes, trampling the shrubs as it stomped out into the open. The creature was enormous – at least twenty feet long – and its limbs were thicker than the nearby tree trunks.

As it caught sight of Frank, the beast stormed into the river bed while letting out a low, rumbling growl. Then it lurched back onto its hind legs. The bear raised itself up until it towered over Frank. It opened its maw and let out a roar, its impressive fangs on full display and spittle foaming around its mouth.

Frank gripped his axe harder, and his empty palm searched for the other weapon. It seemed he had found the source of the pile of shit he had just stepped in. Screaming at the forest probably hadn’t been a great idea in retrospect.

A quick inspection revealed the following:

Dire Bear – Level 183
Health – Unknown
Mana – Unknown
Equipment – Unknown
Resistances – Unknown

The pair eyed each other as though the bear was waiting for Frank to make the first move. After the crappy day he was having, he finally had an object for the frustration and anger that still simmered in his veins. Already, he could feel those emotions begin to bubble over, and he activated his *Rage* ability. An icon appeared in the corner

of his vision, and the world took on a reddish tinge, his surroundings blurring as he fixated on the bear.

When he couldn't wait any longer, Frank darted forward, the dense ropes of muscle in his transformed legs flexing powerfully. Water sprayed behind him, creating a miniature wake as he sped across the riverbed. As he channeled his small mana pool into the crystals in his gloves, fire ripped along the edge of his axe – the flames bending under the force of the wind that swept past him.

The bear shifted at the last moment, raising a meaty paw almost as large as Frank's torso. As he swung, his axe blade ground against the creature's claws, throwing off sparks. The flames singed the bear's fur, emitting a foul odor. However, that only stopped one weapon. Frank shifted his weight, using the momentum of the bear's strike to spin 360 degrees. His other axe bit deeply in the creature's shoulder, and bright-red blood spurted from the wound, mixing with the water of the river.

The beast let out another rage-filled roar and slammed downward with its paws, striking the ground with a thunderous blow that shot water up into the air all around the pair. The ground below Frank's feet trembled, throwing him off balance, and the bear capitalized on its advantage, snapping at Frank's face with its fangs.

He barely backed away in time, as the beast's maw snapped shut mere inches away from his face. He could feel the bear's hot breath wash across him and drops of spittle sprayed his face.

Frank darted backward, summoning his wings at the same time. Spindly growths of flesh lurched out of his skin, swiftly thickening, and extending into the air. Feathers soon sprang from the limbs, and within seconds, a pair of wings adorned Frank's back. He swept forward with his newfound extremities, employing the same tactic he had used with Alexion. He beat his wings hard, throwing up a spray of water and mud that pelted the bear's face.

The beast roared again and pawed at the air, trying to block out the debris that stung its eyes and clouded its vision even as it stumbled to the side, suddenly off balance.

Frank immediately shifted to the offensive, springing forward, and using his wings to propel him even faster. He raced at the creature like a bullet, picking up momentum even as he raised his axes. He just had to hope the creature would hold still for another few seconds.

The bear rubbed at its own face, attempting to clear the dirt and water. Its rage-filled eyes refocused on Frank's form as it hurtled through the air.

It was too late.

Frank bellowed out his anger and frustration, the sound

erupting from his throat as he swung with every ounce of strength he possessed. His twin axe blades bit deeply into the bear's throat, and warm blood coated his hands and face. The beast jerked away, causing the axe lodged in its flesh to be ripped from Frank's grasp. The creature swiped at him blindly, the paw smashing into Frank's chest and sending him hurtling backward.

His back crashed against the trunk of a tree near the bank with a splintering crack. Frank dropped to the ground, red notifications flashing in his peripheral vision. His wings had disappeared, and burning lines were now etched in his chest where the bear had struck him, his own blood coating his body. He fumbled around on the ground with his hand, only to discover that his other axe was missing.

I must have dropped it, he thought frantically.

Frank looked up and saw that the bear was somehow still standing. An axe was still embedded in the creature's neck, and rivulets of blood ran down its body, matting its fur and staining the riverbed crimson. He had no idea how the bear was still alive.

The beast's eyes had lost any semblance of sanity, glaring at Frank's crumpled form. The bear charged, its legs stomping the riverbed and spraying water in every direction as it rushed toward Frank. It looked like a flesh-and-blood freight train was barreling toward him – all fangs and claws and death.

He pushed himself to his feet, wavering slightly. Weaponless, he now only had one option. With a thought, Frank used his *Bear Form*, the muscles of his arms warping and changing. His skin thickened and stretched as knot-like muscles formed along his forearms and shoulders. His fingers shortened and thick claws extended from his flesh in imitation of the beast that was charging toward him.

Frank met the bear head-on. He dodged the creature's initial swipe, and then the pair's paws crashed into each other. His arms buckled under the massive pressure, the muscles in his forearms straining as his stamina drained away at an alarming rate. Only the enhanced strength from the shapeshift kept Frank standing against the towering beast. Even so, he could feel the bear pushing him backward, its weight much greater than Frank's.

He couldn't win this way.

Frank released his hold, letting one of the beast's claws rush past him with a gust of wind. He came up under the animal's guard, and his claws raked the bear's stomach, leaving long furrows in its flesh. He rolled out of the way as the beast dropped back down onto all fours, the water of the riverbed washing some of the bear's blood from his body and stray stones stabbing into his back.

Then Frank was on his feet again. His claws raked across the

bear's eyes. It let out a pained roar, pawing at its own face as one of Frank's claws struck home. Frank sidestepped a frantic strike, noticing that the creature's movements were beginning to slow – likely the product of blood loss and its injured eye.

Taking a risk, he darted forward again, using the last of his waning stamina to snatch the axe lodged in the beast's throat between his enhanced paws. He yanked the weapon free with a vicious jerk – blood spraying from the open wound – before slamming the axe blade right between the creature's eyes.

It gave one more soft huff, its breath washing across Frank's body as the bear wavered on its feet. Frank backed away cautiously, ready for a counter attack. The beast listed to the side, stumbling slightly, before dropping to the ground with a splash.

Then it finally lay unmoving.

Frank stood over the massive beast, his chest heaving, and his body covered in blood – both his own and the bear's. His arms slowly began to revert to their normal appearance, the hair receding and giving way to pale flesh. His chest was torn open, and the wounds were gradually beginning to close as his natural regeneration took hold.

As his vision began to clear and the crimson aura drifted away, he finally witnessed what he had done. The bear's corpse now nearly filled the riverbed, the water stained entirely red with its lifeblood.

"Damn," Frank murmured.

Chapter 4 - Constructive

Frank stared down at the bear's corpse. Its massive form was stretched across most of the river. The area bore numerous signs of the recent battle. The tree that Frank had struck was splintered and cracked, the branches now listing toward the ground. The nearby bank was also coated in a mixture of blood and mud, long ruddy maroon tracks and furrows evidencing their battle.

Frank trudged through the devastation to retrieve his other axe where it lay along the bank. Then he turned his attention back to the bear. He knew what he needed to do next, and he suddenly missed the anger and rage that had carried him through the fight.

He hated this part.

A few short steps and Frank stood over the corpse, staring down at the creature's now-vacant, glassy eyes. Unable to meet the bear's listless stare, he grimaced and turned away, moving along the beast's side until he was standing in front of its stomach. He braced himself, his fingers slowly tightening around the hilt of his axe.

Not giving himself a chance to chicken out, Frank swept forward, his blade biting deeply into the bear's stomach. One blow wasn't enough – not nearly enough. He was forced to hack and cleave his way into the creature's torso, blood and entrails spilling from its stomach and mixing with the already-stained waters of the river. Steam rose from the corpse, its body still warm. It was important that he do this quickly while the kill was still fresh.

Frank didn't let himself stop, no matter how much his stomach churned at what he was doing or how disturbing it felt to have the creature's blood trickle between his fingers. In other games, his avatar would comically swing a pick at a mineral deposit or slice at a creature's body a few times to skin it. Then he would receive a load of ore or some neatly folded pelts delivered to his inventory by some sort of invisible, digital fairy. However, those games didn't do justice to the reality of the task. Skinning or butchering a creature was gruesome, bloody work, and it took much more than a few swipes of a knife to accomplish his goal.

After he had carved a hole in the bear's stomach, Frank reached inside, burying both arms to the elbow. His *Consume* ability had already highlighted the creature's vital organs in a faintly glowing red light, allowing him to pick out his target. His fingers soon curled around thick, slippery flesh, and he felt some resistance as he tugged at the organ experimentally.

Frank pulled hard and fell backward as it gave way abruptly, the flesh tearing and more blood leaking from the bear's body. He could only stare at the huge heart that now rested in his hands, dripping warm crimson blood down his forearms and off his elbows. The organ was nearly the size of a basketball – a testament to the massive creature it had once sustained.

Now it would help Frank grow stronger.

He closed his eyes and leaned forward, his teeth biting into the warm flesh. An odd, coppery taste flooded his mouth, the sensation slightly more muted than in the real world. He forced himself to chew and swallow – fighting back his own nausea. He had lied to Jason in the past. It didn't taste like cookies or cheeseburgers or anything delightful. It tasted sort of like… biting into a raw heart...

The chunk of flesh passed down his throat before settling in his stomach in a warm lump. Frank could feel the energy expand, seeping into his veins and spreading throughout his body. His eyes shot open as the power swiftly turned from a dull simmer to a burning torrent. The bear's heart and body had begun to disintegrate, breaking apart into particles of red light that flashed and danced in front of him before rocketing into his open, blood-covered mouth.

Frank dropped to his knees, overwhelmed by the raging power that surged and pulsed in his veins. His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath.

And then it was over.

As he began to recover, Frank found himself kneeling in the river, the icy water now a welcome relief as the burning energy slowly dissipated. A barrage of notifications appeared in his peripheral vision, the blue windows flickering and demanding his attention.

x1 Level Up!
You have (5) undistributed stat points.

Shift Form: Bear Level Up!

Level Effect	2
+625 STR	
Locked	
Locked	
Locked	
Cost	30 Stamina/Second (Scaling)
Total	integration 21%. Limbs unlocked 1/4.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Rage

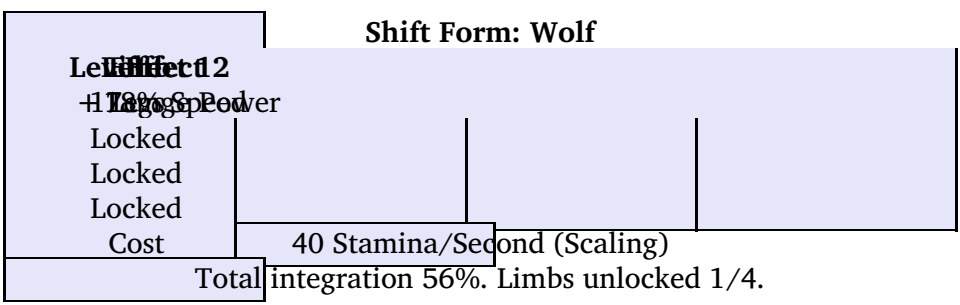
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4
Effect 1: 16.5% damage increase.
Effect 2: -13% stamina drain.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Consume
Skill Level: Beginner Level 8
Effect 1: 11% increased chance to acquire new limb.

Frank surveyed the notifications in disappointment. It appeared that he had leveled up his *Bear Form*. Or at least, he had upgraded a single limb. His total integration had also increased by about 2% by consuming the bear's heart. However, he hadn't gained a new limb or unlocked a second effect for his current shapeshifting form.

Honestly, he found the entire shapeshifting system incredibly confusing. Each time he consumed a new creature, he unlocked a new window – similar to the one for his Bear Form. However, he hadn't been able to unlock more than one limb for any form. The window clearly indicated that he was able to unlock other extremities, but he couldn't figure out what he needed to do to make that happen.

With a frustrated sigh, he pulled up the *Wolf Form* window.



He had reached a "total integration" of 56% for his *Wolf Form* and had even unlocked a second effect for his wolf legs. His individual limbs seemed to gain experience as he consumed creatures and used them – leveling on their own and unlocking additional effects over time. Hell, his legs were already level 17!

Yet he still hadn't unlocked a new limb.

Normally, he would go online and try to find a guide or something that would explain what he was doing wrong. However, AO seemed perversely sensitive about revealing information to its players. There certainly wasn't a manual – well, except that magic

book that had unlocked his Thaumaturge class in the first place. But the book had disappeared in the process.

Some hunting on Rogue-Net had also revealed that shapeshifting was rather uncommon. If anyone had the same abilities as he did, they were keeping it to themselves – not that Frank could really blame them. It was nearly impossible to replicate the same results in-game, and players were actively discouraged from revealing information about themselves. Why would you give your enemies a detailed set of instructions on how to beat you, after all?

One thing was clear: Frank wasn't advancing. Something was preventing him from growing stronger. He just wasn't certain what that was.

He let out another frustrated sigh, swiping away his notifications. Looking down at his hands, Frank realized that he was a mess. He was nearly covered head to toe in the bear's blood, and he flicked a piece of gore off his shoulder.

With a weary grunt, he set to work cleaning the blood from his simple leather armor and his axes, trying his best given how the waters of the river were still stained a bright crimson. Less than a minute later, his equipment was relatively fresh, and his axes were once again looped at his belt. If he walked into a town, the villagers might not run away in terror – at least, not immediately.

Just as he was considering leaving the area and venturing farther north, Frank heard the rustle of leaves along the bank. Expecting another Dire Bear, his hands immediately reached for the axes at his waist as his eyes skimmed the forest.

Yet he froze as he found himself meeting the gaze of a wolf standing sedately on the bank.

He had seen many of the native, flesh-and-blood canines that had once roamed the area around Peccavi – mangy, dark-furred creatures whose flesh hung loosely on their skinny frames. Malnutrition and lack of local wildlife had nearly done the native wolf population in long before William's group had started hunting them. The wolf standing before Frank only bore a loose resemblance to those creatures.

The wolf's fur was a brilliant white, streaked with silver. Its body was enormous, spanning nearly ten feet. The wolf's movements were lithe and almost catlike, the beast stepping toward Frank with the grace of a flowing stream. Although, the thick claws adorning its feet and the fangs peeking from its snout indicated that despite its beauty, this was a creature that could defend itself.

What really captured Frank's attention, however, were the wolf's eyes. They shone with a sapphire glow and watched Frank with uncanny intelligence. For a heartbeat, their gaze met, and he sensed

something in the wolf's expression. Something that felt almost like revulsion or disgust.

Before he could inspect the creature or make any other move, the wolf darted away into the trees. Its steps were so swift that Frank had difficulty following it with his eyes, its body turning into an ivory blur against the dark green of the nearby forest. Even more strange, he found himself moving almost instinctually. Without realizing it, Frank had already converted his legs into his *Wolf Form*, and he was sprinting after the creature.

What the hell am I doing? he wondered. He felt compelled to follow the beast for some reason – its eerie gaze burned into his mind.

Frank darted between the trees, catching only the occasional glimpse of snow-white fur and the flash of silver. He strained and pushed himself even harder, trying to eke out just a little more speed. His surroundings blurred around him, and he knew he was being reckless. This felt like a trap, and even if it weren't, one misstep at this speed would send him crashing headlong into a tree trunk.

But he didn't stop. Each tantalizing flash of fur was enough to make him charge forward with renewed vigor, even as his stamina drained away at an alarming rate and he ventured farther into the uncharted, mountainous territory to the north.

Frank suddenly broke through the trees and slid to a stop in an open glade. Forest ringed the open space and in its center was the strange wolf. It stood calmly, as though waiting for him – its gaze unwavering as it watched him approach. The wolf seemed entirely unafraid of him. As Frank neared, he saw a small white scar beneath the creature's left eye – those same eyes that seemed to weigh and judge him with each step.

As he took in these details, he felt his feet knocked out from under him, and he hit the ground hard, the wind rushing from his lungs. He rolled, trying to assess this new threat. However, his mind went blank as he saw that thick vines had emerged from the ground and were now wrapped around his feet, curling and coiling up his body. The tendrils wrapped swiftly around his axes, locking them in place. He struggled against the plants, ripping at the vegetation with his bare hands. No matter how fast he tore at the tendrils, they simply kept coming, lashing him to the ground and binding him in place.

Frank strained against the rope-like vines, managing to push himself to his knees. He wouldn't be bound! He could feel his vision go red as his *Rage* ability activated and he could feel his *Bear Form* begin to take hold, the muscles shifting beneath his arms. He let out an involuntary, frustrated roar that seemed to vibrate the trees nearby.

Then he felt something prick his neck – a sharp sting that was

only barely muted by the in-game pain feedback. He reached his hand up, and he felt the outline of something slender and sharp. When he pulled his hand away, it was slick with blood.

What the hell? he thought.

Three more sharp pinpricks along his back and shoulders.

His already-waning stamina began to deplete even more swiftly, and his vision swam, wavering and dancing erratically. Red notifications flashed in his peripheral vision, indicating that he was afflicted by some sort of status effect. He slumped to the ground, his limbs suddenly feeling heavy and failing to respond to his orders. The vines wrapped around him more firmly, binding him completely and preventing any movement.

Frank managed to look up one last time to find the wolf now hovering above him, its white form obscuring most of the forest behind it. He could just barely make out shadowy forms drifting out of the trees behind the beast.

His last memory before the darkness claimed him was of those strange eyes – those sapphire irises that seemed to stare into his soul.

And then the world went black.

Chapter 5 - Judged

Light suddenly penetrated the darkness, and Frank blinked rapidly. He was lying on the ground, something rough digging into his back. His eyes crept open slowly, and he discovered that his vision was still swimming with red notifications that danced like angry fireflies.

What the hell happened?

Even as that thought crossed his mind, the memories began to return. He remembered running. The glade in the forest. There had been a large silver wolf – the creature's sapphire eyes staring at him with uncanny intelligence. Then the forest had come alive and sharp needles had punctured his skin, injecting some sort of burning substance into his body that slowed his movements and left him feeling weak.

It was a trap!

Frank sat up abruptly, adrenaline surging through his veins. He immediately regretted that decision as the room listed sideways for a moment, and he could feel his stomach protest violently. He let out a groan and leaned heavily on his arm. It took several seconds for both his vision and his stomach to settle, the acidic bite of bile lingering at the back of his throat.

Once he began to recover, Frank finally got a chance to survey his surroundings. He was sitting in a dark room that seemed to be comprised entirely of thick branches. The limbs twisted and twined together in an intricate pattern so complex that he had difficulty following each branch. Sunlight trickled through small gaps in the walls, faintly illuminating the room – or rather the *cell*. It quickly became clear that the enclosure lacked a door and there were few other uses for a room without an entrance.

Frank felt at his waist, only to confirm a moment later that his weapons and equipment were all missing – including his bags. He was clothed in a pair of simple cloth trousers, a loose shirt, and a pair of worn boots.

He eyed the branches that made up the walls, his expression now appraising. The limbs looked sturdy, each one nearly a foot across. His axes would have made short work of the branches, but that wasn't an option. He might be able to break them if he used his *Bear Form*, but it would be tough, and the noise would likely alert whatever guards lingered nearby.

His gaze shifted to the system UI floating in his peripheral

vision, and a thought occurred to him.

There was another solution to his predicament.

With a swift gesture, Frank pulled up the game's messaging system. He tapped Jason's icon, and a translucent keyboard appeared before him. As his fingers hovered over the keys, he froze. What was he doing? He had wanted this, hadn't he? He had wanted to strike off on his own – to go on an adventure just like this one.

Well, maybe not *quite* like this one. He had ended up in some sort of forest prison awfully fast. But having his friends come bail him out was just more of the same – that was exactly what they had been doing since he had started playing AO. Carrying him. If he was going to catch up with them, he needed to learn to play on his own. Even if that meant being stuck in what looked like a druid's jail cell.

Damn it. I'm an idiot.

With a grimace, Frank swiped away the UI and struggled to stand up – still feeling a little wobbly as his body processed the last traces of poison that lingered in his veins.

As he regained his feet, the branches along one side of the room suddenly shifted. Frank watched wide-eyed as the limbs slowly untwined and drifted apart, soon forming a large doorway along the wall. Before Frank could react, the familiar silver wolf appeared in the entrance. The creature eyed Frank with those same chilling eyes. He saw no humor or compassion there – just a clinical precision.

After seeing that he was standing and unarmed, the wolf backed away, and two very human-looking men entered the cell. They both held thick wooden staves and were robed in rigid leather armor that looked like tree bark. As one, they looked at the ceiling and slammed the butt of their staves against the floor.

"Hey, what are…?" Frank began.

He was abruptly cut off as branches twined down from the ceiling, swiftly encircling his wrists, and jerking his arms behind his back. At the same time, more tendrils wound around his neck and mouth, cutting off his ability to speak as he chomped down on rough bark. Even as he watched, the branches broke away from the cell wall, leaving his hands completely bound.

Yup, druids. Totally druids, he thought to himself. Although, he wasn't quite sure how he had managed to piss off this group. Maybe it had been killing the bear?

Great, I found the game's version of PETA.

He wasn't given long to ponder on why these people had captured him. The two men – his guards he supposed – shoved him roughly toward the doorway. The silver wolf took the lead, padding softly down a forested hallway. Unable to speak, and since his captors seemed in no hurry to explain themselves, Frank decided to pay

careful attention to his surroundings and his captors.

That's what he expected Jason would do in this situation.

They traced a path down a wide hallway. The walls were still comprised of thick, intertwined branches that stretched up into the air and formed a vaulted ceiling nearly fifteen feet above him. Strangely, he didn't see any doors along the hall, but he supposed that there could be more cells like the one he had just occupied hidden behind the leaves and limbs.

As they wove a path through the forested structure, Frank's thoughts drifted back to how his two guards had made the branches move. He couldn't place the school of magic. Earth or water, maybe? Eliza had demonstrated an ability to grow plants, but not control them. And none of the earth mages that Frank had met had demonstrated an ability to manipulate plants. Putting that all aside, they hadn't whispered any incantations either, which was odd.

And then there was the gigantic silver wolf that padded in front of the guards. Was the beast some sort of pet? Although, that didn't seem quite right. The silver wolf seemed to exhibit a high level of intelligence, and he hadn't seen the guards issue any sort of command. If anything, it felt like the wolf was directing the two men beside him. But that seemed crazy…

Any crazier than stepping in bear shit and getting kidnapped by a bunch of druids?

His thoughts were interrupted as the group reached an arched opening that led into a large chamber. Frank could only stare as he was led into a vast open expanse. The ceiling of this new room loomed fifty feet or more over the floor. The roof was held up by an intricate series of branches that crisscrossed through the air. On those limbs rested birds and beasts of every shape and color imaginable. Plumed feathers shifted to dry scales in the blink of an eye. The only common characteristic among these creatures was that they seemed to be able to fly.

Frank shifted uncomfortably as the gaze of the dozens of winged creatures focused on him. However, the floor of the chamber gave him no greater comfort. Human guards ringed the room, dressed in the same garb as his little entourage. They seemed unperturbed by the animals that rested casually among their ranks. Frank saw more mundane creatures – such as bears and wolves – sprinkled in amid more fantastical monsters. What appeared to be a basilisk rested only a few feet away, its massive serpentine tongue flicking toward him as though trying to taste the air.

The strangest part of this scene was the quiet. Every eye – whether human or beast – was riveted on Frank, and only the faint shuffle of his feet broke the eerie silence.

What the hell did I step in this time? he wondered.

One of the guards kicked at Frank, forcing him to continue forward. The silver wolf still led their small group, sitting sedately as it reached the center of the room, its eyes riveted on the far wall.

Frank soon had an opportunity to see what had captured its attention.

A dais had been erected along the chamber's back wall, the raised platform hosting three seats made entirely of woven tree branches. Really, Frank should have called them "thrones" since that's what they looked like. Three individuals sat in those chairs – their eyes all focused on Frank. He could only assume they were the leaders of this group.

"What have you brought before us, Silver?" one of the three asked, her tone not unkind. She was an older woman, her graying hair tied back in a no-nonsense ponytail. She was robed in worn, but functional leather armor. Even from this distance, Frank could see that many burns and scars marred her skin.

"And why are you still assuming that form?" the man in the middle demanded. He was a hulking giant of a human, nearly double the size of his colleagues. His chest was bare, and Frank could see rope-like muscle shift beneath his skin with each movement.

Frank's eyes widened in surprise as he saw the silver wolf's body suddenly shimmer and shift. Before his eyes, the creature shrunk, shedding its fur and claws and its limbs contorting. In contrast to Frank's shapeshifting, he saw no pain warp the wolf's face, as though the process was natural.

Only a moment later, a slender young woman stood where the wolf had sat only a moment ago. Her hair was a radiant white and silver where it flowed down her back, and her thick fur had been replaced by practical leathers that hugged her athletic frame. However, she wasn't entirely human, either. Frank stared at the furry ears that sprouted from her head and the bushy tail that swayed gently behind her.

Who is she?

What is she? he wondered, captivated.

This was the first demi-human he had encountered in the game, and he wasn't counting the lizardmen. Those creatures had seemed to be an entirely separate race, not some sort of wolf-human hybrid.

The woman – who must be named Silver – turned to look at him. Her eyes still seemed to glow with a radiant blue light, a thin scar dotting one eyebrow. He didn't know what he expected to find in her gaze, but he recoiled at the blatant disgust he found there.

"My apologies," she began, addressing the hulking man in the center of the dais. "I was concerned that this *tainted one* might

represent a danger to the pack." She almost seemed to spit out the words "tainted one" – hate tinging her voice. Frank couldn't help but flinch at her tone.

Silver turned to address the older woman. "To answer your question, Leandra, I found this traveler near the southern border near the undead kingdom. He accidentally entered a Dire Bear's hunting grounds and… angered it. When confronted by the bear, they engaged in combat."

The young woman side-eyed him. "I was about to intervene but hesitated as I saw him use a corrupted form of the *Shift*. He was only able to shift parts of his body – his legs and hands primarily. However, I also observed him adopt a Roc's wings."

This news seemed to cause alarm among the creatures filling the room. They chirped, hissed, and growled – the sound echoing through the chamber. Similar alarm appeared on the faces of the three elders on the platform.

"Be still, my brothers and sisters," Leandra said in a coaxing voice, addressing the creatures and humans filling the room. Even the beasts quieted quickly, as though able to understand her words.

"Cultist," the third man said in a near whisper, his voice barely carrying through the room. He was a reed-thin man and seemed to be wearing a robe made entirely of leaves with flowers blooming at occasional intervals along the garment. At first glance, Frank had almost assumed that he had become one with the wooden throne.

"Do not rush to judgment, Sthren. Wisdom is knowing how to remove your own bias," the hulking man in the center said. His expression was still impassive as he watched Frank. "Let's have Silver finish her story."

"As you wish, Alderas," Sthren replied in another whisper.

Silver cleared her throat. "He slew the bear, but what happened next was much worse." She grimaced, her mouth twisting as though she had sucked on something sour. "I watched as he carved the beast's heart from its chest… and ate it. He consumed the creature's essence, and its body melted away."

Another rustle of feathers and click of claws filled the room – although more muted this time under the stern gaze of the three leaders on the dais.

"I followed him after that, calling for reinforcements from my hunting pack. I lured him to a nearby glade, and our Grower was able to restrain and incapacitate him," Silver said.

So, it was a trap, Frank thought. *Although, what the hell is a Grower?* His gaze shifted to the two human guards that still stood beside him. *Perhaps these guys?* They had been able to manipulate plants, after all.

“Have you questioned the prisoner?” Alderas asked. His voice carried no judgment and yet his words had a sort of power over Silver – a grimace tugging at her lips and her back straightening.

The young woman’s eyes darted toward him and then back to the dais, her fists clenching. “I didn’t. I kept him in a nearby cell until the council could meet. However, his abilities are clear. He must be one of those madmen.” She looked around the room. “We all know what the Cultists did to our home. Their powers are a corruption – a taint upon the natural *shift*. They are a danger to everyone that lives in the valley.”

This earned Silver another angry rustle from the creatures that filled the room, and Frank could hear something rather large growling behind him, although he wasn’t able to turn to look. Perhaps that was a good thing.

Frank’s brow furrowed in confusion as he watched Silver. *Cultists? Does she mean the same group that we fought in the dungeon north of Peccavi?*

When Frank turned his gaze back to the dais, he found that Alderas was watching him with an appraising expression. “What would you have us do?” he asked, addressing Silver.

The girl looked slightly taken aback by the question – as though she wasn’t expecting it – but she recovered quickly. “He is a traveler. I say we should plant him beneath the Ancestor Tree. The legends say this should mean permanent death even for one of his kind.” Her sapphire eyes flashed angrily at this last statement and the creatures filling the room let out barks and hisses of approval.

Frank felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. *It means what now?*

He had no idea what an *Ancestor Tree* was or what Silver meant by “planting” him, but there was no mistaking the deadly certainty in her voice. He was now seriously regretting not messaging Jason and Riley while his hands were still unbound.

Alderas simply watched Silver, and a long moment of silence passed. The young woman glared up at him defiantly, as though challenging him to contest her judgment.

“You would condemn a man to death before hearing his side of the story?” Alderas finally asked. “Is that justice? Is that what this council should stand for?”

The angry murmurs turned almost immediately to a hushed murmur. Frank couldn’t help but note the way that Silver’s own expression cracked, sudden doubt flitting across her face before being forcefully replaced with the familiar anger and disgust.

“Yes,” she said simply. “We have no need to hear from the Cultists.”

“Well, it is a good thing that you do not lead us then, child of the pack,” Leandra said, clicking her tongue. “Go on, Sthren, let us hear this traveler speak before we make a decision,” the older woman continued, gesturing at her slender, leaf-covered colleague.

Sthren gave a curt nod, bowing his head slightly. Before Frank knew what was happening, he felt the bindings along his wrists and mouth loosen and then fall away, tumbling to the ground. He cracked his jaw and rubbed at his wrists, the muscles aching slightly even after just the short time he had been bound. Then he took the opportunity to rise to his feet. At the sudden movement, Silver took a step forward, and he could have sworn he heard the girl emit a low growl, her eyes flashing.

“Take care, traveler. One wrong move and your blood will spill across the floor,” she said in a low voice that didn’t quite carry to the dais.

Frank just nodded, surprised by the ferocity in her eyes. He could feel his palms getting sweaty. He wasn’t afraid of the girl’s threat so much as the very real stakes that had just been added to this situation. Permanent death for a traveler? His character might be hanging in the balance, and he had better make this explanation a good one.

He took a deep breath. He could do this. He had done it before and had watched Jason go through the same spiel dozens of times. It was all about confidence – confidence that he didn’t exactly feel right now – but hopefully faking it would be good enough.

“Now, traveler, what is your name?” Alderas asked him.

“My name is Frank,” he said, turning to address the council. “I am the left hand of the Regent of the Twilight Throne.”

This earned him a few murmurs from around the room. “Is that so?” Alderas said, raising an eyebrow. “So, the undead kingdom is in league with the cultists now?”

“We have nothing to do with those nutjobs,” Frank retorted, speaking without thinking. He saw the three leaders shift on their thrones, sharing a look.

“And yet you have their abilities,” Leandra replied calmly.

“Well, we encountered a group of cultists in a dungeon north of Peccavi,” Frank amended. “A few dozen miles to the east of where Silver found me. They had assumed control of some sort of ruined city, breeding a race of minotaurs to act as their guards. They also exhibited shapeshifting abilities and claimed to be using their magic to create a new god.”

He met the gaze of each of the three council members evenly. “We killed every last one of them, including the thing that they were cooking up in the caverns below the city. We now have control of the

town of Peccavi and maintain a garrison there to regularly clear the dungeon and its occupants."

Alderas looked over at Silver. "Have our hunting parties seen any sign of the undead in this area lately?"

The young woman grimaced but gave a curt nod.

"And what of your encounter with this bear?" Leandra inquired, watching Frank with a curious expression. "Why do you have these cultists' abilities?"

"I found a book among the remains of their city," Frank explained, hesitating on how to explain what had happened, his gaze dropping to the floor. "I read its content and was granted these… *powers*, I guess you could call them. I-I don't know how to use them. I had hoped to venture off on my own to learn more about them."

Frank shook his head. "I didn't realize that this region was occupied, and it was not my intention to disturb your people or cause you any harm."

"Truth," Sthren whispered, gesturing at Frank.

Frank heard something rustle behind him and turned quickly. He discovered that spindly vines had sprouted from the ground, twining up into the air around him. Petals had bloomed along the tendrils, each one glowing a soft white. He had no idea what this plant was or what the color meant, but from the frustrated anger in Silver's sapphire eyes, it was clear that it was important. And probably good for Frank.

Silence had descended upon the chamber, and each of the three council members appeared to be weighing the information before them. It felt like Frank had swallowed a metal ball, his stomach lurching as the fate of his character hung in the balance. The three leaders each glanced at one another and then seemed to reach an unspoken conclusion, both Leandra and Sthren giving Alderas a curt nod.

As one, all three stood, standing proudly upon the dais.

"Frank's story holds weight," Alderas said finally, addressing the room. "And the nightshade flowers do not lie. He speaks the truth – or at least what he believes to be the truth."

Alderas glanced at Silver before turning his focus back to the creatures and humans filling the room. "Despite what one of our pack leaders witnessed, we do not believe that Frank is a member of this cult and he should not be held accountable for the crimes of others. We also have no wish to antagonize our neighbors to the south. Jason's reputation precedes him, and a conflict would not bode well for either of our kingdoms. Besides, we would do well to bolster our allies if they are working to suppress these fanatics."

Alderas met Frank's gaze evenly. "In fact, we may actually be

able to help you with your mission." He waved at the humans and creatures that filled the room. "Some time ago, the cultists raided our Valley and stole our powers – corrupting them to their own perverted ends. However, at its core, the *Shift* is the same. We may be able to help you to discover how to master it. Consider this a token of good faith between our two nations."

"Thank you. I would greatly appreciate the assistance, and I humbly accept your offer," Frank said, bowing his head. He could still feel his heart hammering in his chest, but he had managed to worm his way out of this situation – if only thanks to some sort of magical flower.

"But he is still an outsider," Silver growled. "And his powers are a corruption of the *Shift*. Would we make the same mistakes that led to the attack on our home?"

Her sentiment was mirrored by others among the crowd, angry murmurs filling the room. Apparently, they were not so quick to forget what the cultists had done. Or maybe they just saw Frank as a scapegoat for their vengeance.

"And is that not what the other humans think of us – of our abilities? Have they not said the same many times over?" Leandra snapped harshly. "This place was meant to be a sanctuary for our kind. Would you have us turn away those that seek only to understand their own gifts?"

Leandra shook her head, glancing around the room before turning to address Alderas. "It seems our pups have forgotten what led us to create Haven. We simply foster the same hate in our own hearts that we sought to flee."

Alderas sighed, his gaze shifting to Silver. His expression was sad, but resigned. "She is right. It seems our isolation has caused some of us to lose sight of the purpose of this place. Yet perhaps it is not too late to correct this mistake.

"You will take this young one into your hunting pack," Alderas ordered, gesturing to Frank. "You are tasked with showing him our ways and helping him to master his *Shift*."

"But…" Silver protested, her eyes widening with surprise.

Alderas interjected harshly, his words coming out in a low, rumbling growl. Frank saw his muscles surge powerfully, and patches of fur appeared along his skin as though he was shifting involuntarily. "There are no *buts*. I am Alpha, and my will is law – unless you wish to challenge my rule."

Silver's expression hardened at the implied challenge that Alderas had issued, anger still flashing in her eyes. "Yes, *father*," she said before turning on her heel and marching from the room – all eyes on her retreating form.

Father? Oh, shit. Frank looked back and forth between Alderas and Silver, suddenly starting to notice some similarities in their features – they had the same hawkish cheekbones and glowing eyes. And, of course, the whole shapeshifting thing.

Frank looked on as Alderas swallowed his own anger and glanced around the room. “This council meeting is now over. Please return to your duties.”

The remainder of the humans and creatures that filled the chamber grumbled amongst themselves but began to filter out of the room. As they left, many spared glances at Frank that warred between curiosity and contempt. He averted his eyes. He might not be a prisoner, but it was clear that he would not be well loved here.

At least he was used to that sort of treatment.

As the group began to vacate, Frank watched Alderas. The man’s hard expression wavered as he watched his daughter’s fleeing form, a brief note of sadness entering his gaze. Then he shifted his attention to Frank abruptly.

“Thank you,” Frank said, bowing his head slightly.

“Do not thank me yet, traveler,” Alderas replied, his tone even. “You will be given no special treatment. As with everyone else, you must earn your place in the pack – as well as our trust. Consider this a trial. Once you have proven your worth, we will return your weapons and equipment.”

Frank gulped slightly at the older man’s expression. He wanted to argue, but there was something about Alderas that exuded strength – as though he would have no difficulty ripping Frank’s limbs from his body if he chose. He didn’t really want to discover whether his instincts were right or not. Besides, there was still that whole *planting* thing.

“I suggest you move quickly,” Alderas said, gesturing toward the door. “If I know my daughter, she will find a way to avoid my orders. You best find her and stay as close as you can.”

Frank took the not-so-subtle hint that he was being dismissed and started toward the door at a light jog. Hopefully, Silver hadn’t made it too far in such a short time.

As Frank’s form disappeared through the door, the three council members were left standing on the dais.

“Are you certain that this is the right decision?” Leandra asked. “Others will share Silver’s feelings. That boy will not have an easy time.”

Alderas let out another sigh. “I am. Perhaps it will be painful – for everyone involved – but sometimes pain is necessary. And we cannot let our fear cause us to repeat the same mistakes we sought to avoid. It is our duty to the pack.”

Leandra grunted in acknowledgment before turning her gaze to Sthren where the slender man stood nearby, standing so still that it was difficult to tell whether he was breathing. “Thoughts? You’ve been even more quiet than normal.”

Sthren’s gaze was fixed on the door, although his eyes seemed unfocused, as though he was observing something far away. He snapped out of his momentary fugue and met Leandra’s eyes. “The future will be interesting.” With that simple statement, he began striding toward the door, his back rigid and his limbs moving awkwardly.

Alderas barked out a laugh – as much in humor as to cover his own concern. “Well, he doesn’t say much, but his observations are always accurate. It will indeed be *interesting*.” Then he turned to follow his fellow council member.

Leandra grimaced as she watched his back. “That can cut both ways. I just hope this doesn’t come back to bite us,” she murmured. “Not again.”

Chapter 6 - Druidic

Frank rushed out of the building, bright morning light suddenly shining down upon him. He stood frozen in shock, surveying the nearby area. The streets of Haven were filled with lush green grass, and every structure seemed to have been created by the same intertwined branches, creating a cascade of infinitely complex, emerald buildings that wound and wove together into an almost-singular living plant. This wash of green was broken only by the rainbow of flowers that coated many of the houses and shops, their petals standing out in vivid colors and turning themselves toward the sun.

The town was flanked on every side by ivory, snowcapped peaks, and dense black clouds swirled around the mountains. Sunlight shone down through a single hole in the cloud cover. The opening centered almost directly above Haven, as though the gods had blessed this particular spot with sunlight. The air had a distinct chill, but it wasn't oppressive, the sunlight helping to ward off the cold.

What truly captured Frank's attention was the massive tree on the western edge of the town. Its trunk speared into the sky, almost rivaling the nearby mountaintops. Frank could only gape. He had seen a few redwoods in the real world, but they were a pale imitation of what stood before him. This tree was truly enormous, its branches spreading outward for dozens of yards in every direction, each limb covered in thick vegetation.

Is this the Ancestor Tree? he wondered.

Shaking off his shock, Frank caught sight of Silver's white tail swishing down the road, and he broke into a jog to catch up, weaving through the townsfolk that dotted the street. They gave him a wide berth, glaring at him suspiciously. More than one person reached toward their weapons as he passed or pulled their children away from him. Clearly, news of his admittance into the town – and his unsavory abilities – had already made the rounds.

He bit back a grimace. It likely wasn't going to be easy to win these people over.

Frank caught up with Silver a moment later, his breathing slightly ragged.

"Hey, sorry," he said. "You move pretty fast."

Silver barely spared him a dismissive glance, continuing her militant pace forward without hesitation. She was heading directly for the tree on the western edge of town.

"So, uh… where are we going?"

No answer.

Frank frowned as he inspected the young woman. There was clearly no love lost here, and he had no idea how he was going to convince Silver to teach him. Even more curious was why she hated these cultists so much. They were crazy assholes, but her reaction seemed extreme. Maybe something personal? Although, he wasn't in any hurry to dig into that issue right now. He was pretty sure that wouldn't win him any points with her.

Either way, from her demeanor and her father's explicit warning, he suspected that this might not be the sort of fruitful adventure he had been hoping for. Although, the bright side was that he had at least found people that could *possibly* train him – even though most seemed like they would much rather slit his throat and use him to fertilize their homes.

I thought druids were supposed to be friendly.

Now that he wasn't confronted with the imminent destruction of his character, and since Silver didn't seem interested in talking to him, he had a better chance to look at the townsfolk. Most seemed to be human, and, despite the verdant landscape, they all seemed to be going about rather ordinary activities. Merchants shouted out advertisements for their wares, and various villagers tugged goods to and fro down the street.

However, Frank noted a few people had animal features like Silver – ears sprouting from their head and tails idly swishing behind them. Several different species seemed to be present, from fox to cat to wolf to something slightly serpentine that he didn't recognize at all. One villager glanced at him through slitted eyes, his eyelids blinking horizontally.

With a shudder, Frank turned his attention back to Silver. He had focused on the ears and tail before, but now that he wasn't standing in front of the council, he also noted the small patches of fur that coated her arms.

"Stop staring," Silver said curtly, not bothering to look at him as they wound farther through the town.

Frank flinched, uncertain how she had even noticed him watching her.

"I'm sorry. It's just I've never seen… someone like you, I guess," Frank said, trying to be tactful. What exactly did you call a person with a tail?

His gaze panned back to the other townsfolk. "Are you all human? Or demi-human? Or… something?"

When Frank turned back to Silver, he found that she was definitely looking at him now – but he instantly regretted that. Cold,

icy anger filled her sapphire eyes, and he could have sworn he heard a low-pitch growl vibrate her throat. “Am I human?” she demanded. “What sort of question is that?”

“Uh, well to be fair you do have a tail,” Frank replied, gesturing at her backside where the fluffy appendage now stood still, the hair rising slightly into the air.

“Of course I’m human,” she replied through gritted teeth. Her canines seemed a little sharper than normal, but maybe that was just his imagination. “You really don’t know anything, do you?”

Frank could feel himself getting irritated. *Yeah, no shit. That’s why I’m here, and you’re supposed to be teaching me!* he felt like shouting at her. Yet he tamped down on that anger, pushing it away. That wouldn’t help him right now.

So instead he said, “I guess I don’t. That’s why I need your help.” He couldn’t fully remove all traces of sarcasm from his voice.

“Abigail can answer your stupid questions,” she answered sharply.

“Who is Abigail?” Frank asked, trying to resist the urge to throttle the woman beside him. Although, the memory of her massive wolf form helped restrain him. Despite her shitty attitude, he suspected he might not fare well in a straight fight with Silver, and the glares of the nearby townsfolk seemed to indicate that they would be more than happy to help her dismember him.

Silver just grunted.

This was basically the only response he got for the rest of their walk. No matter what he asked or what he said, Silver ignored him.

The pair wound through the grass-covered streets until they exited the town proper. Frank had assumed that the Ancestor Tree was located on the edge of town, but that guess proved to be wrong – he had greatly underestimated its size. The path soon became rocky, dense vegetation giving way to more mountainous terrain. As they walked, the tree grew ever taller, and its expansive branches stretched outward, blocking out the sunlight.

Out of curiosity, Frank pulled up his in-game map.

The translucent screen flickered into existence in front him, indicating his position with a small green dot. Apart from Haven, the area around him was entirely grayed out. Apparently, his map data hadn’t updated when he had been knocked unconscious and kidnapped. Go figure. The only obvious takeaway from his map was that he was located somewhere deep in the mountain range north of the Twilight Throne and far to the west of Peccavi.

Shit, I’m a long way from home.

Without resetting his respawn point, this also meant that if he died, it would be a long hike back – assuming he could even find his

way back to Haven on his own. He suspected that this lot had been cautious with guarding the location of their town. He had the impression from listening to the council members bicker that they had some compelling reasons for building a town in the middle of nowhere.

"We're here," Silver said gruffly from in front of Frank.

As Frank crested a final ridge, he found himself looking down into a small circular valley. A lake rested in the center, nestled up against the truly enormous trunk of the Ancestor Tree – its surface reflecting the dappled sunlight. The base of the tree actually sat atop a huge boulder that spanned hundreds of yards, its roots cascading down across the stone surface before embedding themselves deeply in the ground.

At this distance, Frank could also make out a group of individuals resting beside the lake, lounging in the lush grass that coated the area. Without any further comment, Silver started down into the valley, and Frank hurried to follow her.

As they neared the group, Frank could see that they were mostly children. There must have been at least twenty, and the oldest couldn't have been more than 10 years old. Before he had a chance to question what was going on, a young girl rushed toward Silver and jumped into her arms with a squeal.

"Ana!" she cried.

Ana? Is she talking about Silver? Not for the first time that day, Frank was left feeling confused. Although, part of him felt like Ana was a much less intimidating name. It was a name he expected to accompany a ready smile and a hug – which was exactly what the young girl received from Silver.

Silver – or Ana – stroked the girl's hair, her expression softening. "How are you doing, Sophie?" For a fraction of a second, Silver's normally grim expression cracked, giving way to kindness. She looked beautiful, her eyes a happy sparking blue and her ears perked up in excitement.

"Good," Sophie chirped, dropping back down to the ground. "Abigail says she's going to be teaching us something new today!"

"That's great," Silver replied, patting the girl's head.

Sophie's attention shifted to Frank's bulky form, and her eyes went wide. He waved at her, smiling – although this did nothing to ease Sophie's suspicious glare.

The young girl edged back toward Silver and whispered to her loudly enough for Frank to hear. "Who's your friend?"

As Silver saw Frank watching, her smile faded, and she reassumed her familiar grim demeanor. "This isn't a friend. His name is Frank, and he'll be sitting in on the class today." She shifted her

attention back to Sophie, leaning down slightly. “Stay away from him,” she instructed the girl forcefully. “If he does anything strange, alert the guards.” Sophie nodded quickly, but still peered at Frank curiously from behind Silver.

Guards? Frank hadn’t missed that comment.

His gaze shifted to the edge of the ridge ringing the valley. At first, he didn’t see anything at all. However, after a moment, he caught a slight movement. It was enough for him to realize that several individuals stood in formation around the valley, their armor blending in almost seamlessly with the environment. Were the townsfolk that nervous about his presence, or was it normal for them to post guards with their children?

“A new member of our class, hmm?” a voice spoke up abruptly.

Frank felt something sharp stab him in the side and let out a very manly and dignified yelp as he jumped to the side. He turned to find a tiny woman standing beside him, eyeing him curiously. Her hair was a brilliant auburn-red that reminded him of fall and freckles dotted her cheeks and nose.

“He seems well-fed if nothing else,” the woman commented.

Frank could feel his face flush. Had this strange woman just called him fat?

“What do you think, Herbert?” the woman said, speaking to something on her shoulder.

Is she crazy? Why is everyone in this game crazy?

However, before Frank could question her sanity too much, a small furry form appeared on the woman’s shoulder and glanced at Frank. For all intents and purposes, it looked like a hamster. It was surprising how mundane the creature appeared. Black beady eyes embedded in a puff of fur stared back at him. They carried a disturbing intelligence, as though it could understand the strange woman’s question.

Herbert seemed skeptical and gave a noncommittal shrug.

“Abigail, this is Frank,” Silver said bluntly. “The council decided that he should be admitted to Haven and taught our ways. He is capable of making the *Shift* – but it is corrupted. It seems to be based on the cultists’ warped practices.”

When Frank saw Abigail flinch, he quickly added, “What she means is that I want to learn how to *shift* normally. I’m in no way affiliated with the cultists.” He spared a glare at Silver – an expression she returned without hesitation.

A frown tugged at Abigail’s lips for the beat of a butterfly’s wings before she seemed to make a decision. A bright smile lit her face, and she stuck out a hand. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Frank! I would be happy for you to attend our class,” she offered,

gesturing toward the other children.

"Uh…" Frank muttered, taken aback at her easy acceptance. It didn't help that he suddenly noticed more than twenty pairs of eyes staring at him. "Wait, so this is a class for children?" he asked hesitantly.

"What would you call yourself?" Silver demanded. "You are merely a child when it comes to learning our ways. What better way for you to learn than to start as one of our own." Her tone was almost sickeningly sweet as she said this last part and Frank caught a malicious twinkle in her eye.

"Anyway, I will be back to retrieve you in a few hours," Silver continued.

Before he could react, she immediately transformed, her body filling out and expanding at an incredible pace. One moment, a young woman stood before him, and in the blink of an eye, she was replaced with a large wolf. In several loping bounds, Silver took off toward the east. She soon crested the ridge encircling the small valley and disappeared from sight.

Shit, that was fast, Frank thought to himself, his irritation with Silver warring with his appreciation of her shifting abilities. He had never managed to transform that quickly – even when it was only a single limb.

Frank felt a hand on his arm and found that Abigail was tugging him toward the other students. "Well, we are happy to have you here! Why don't you take a seat and we can get started!" she said with bubbly enthusiasm, oblivious to the tension that had lingered between Frank and Silver. Although, Herbert still stared at Frank from atop her shoulder, his beady black eyes less friendly.

As Frank sat down in the grass and tried to ignore the curious expressions of the nearby children, he couldn't help but feel confused. When he had started playing earlier, he hadn't expected to be attending a class in front of a massive, ancient tree with a bunch of school children. Which only made him feel mildly stupid. Also, who the hell was Abigail, and why did she have what looked like a pet hamster? And hadn't Alderas told him to keep Silver close? He had apparently failed miserably at that goal. Silver's taunting expression still burned into his mind's eye.

Frank let out a soft sigh. *Man, this game can be weird sometimes*.

Chapter 7 - Enlightening

Abigail clapped her hands, standing in front of the group of children near the edge of the lake. Herbert was perched on her shoulder, imitating her movements, and clapping his little paws together. “Alright, class. As you can see, today we have a guest! His name is Frank. Say hi to Frank!”

“Hello, Frank,” the children chorused.

“Uh… hi,” Frank said in return.

Yeah, so this isn’t weird at all, he thought sarcastically.

“Since Frank is a newcomer to Haven, I thought it might be a good idea to go over some of the basics. Does anyone here know how Haven came to be?”

A hand shot into the air – a small boy straining to be noticed. Abigail pointed at him. “My mom said that a long time ago, our kind was hunted. That we fled here to be safe.”

“Very good,” Abigail said, smiling broadly. “That was the gist of it. More specifically, we all have something in common. Our magical affinities are all quite low. This is a rather rare condition, but it often gives rise to unique abilities. Does anyone know how magical affinities are raised?”

No hands went up, and the children looked at each other uncertainly.

Frank tentatively raised his hand – not feeling stupid at all. Nope, not at all.

“Frank?”

“The magical affinities are tied to certain personality traits – desire, passion, *etc.* You can raise your affinity by acting in a way that is consistent with those traits.”

“Very good!” Abigail said, giving him a wink. “So, what would it mean if a person had a very low affinity for all six types?” she asked, leaning forward abruptly and peering at him.

“Uh…” Frank really wasn’t sure. His affinities had always been quite low and rather even. He could vaguely recall that this had been one of the requirements for using the tome he had found in the cultist dungeon. However, that didn’t give him any insight into what that meant; it had actually been a point of confusion for a long time.

But if the affinities represented certain personality traits and he had low scores in everything, did that mean he lacked a personality? That he was just sort of a boring, blank slate? He grimaced slightly. So, the game was indirectly telling him he was worthless?

Great.

"I'm not sure," Frank said finally.

"Don't worry, it isn't obvious," Abigail chirped in response. "The answer is that people who tend to have a low affinity in all six magical schools are more *empathic*. We tend to pick up on the emotions of others more keenly." She glanced at the rest of the class. "So, it's easier for us to tell when someone is angry or sad, for example. Have you all experienced this before?"

The children nodded and looked at Abigail curiously.

Frank's eyebrows shot up. Really? He supposed he had always been able to get along with people pretty well or pick up on their mood – a few exceptions aside. Like he could tell when something was troubling Jason or Riley. But did that really make him more empathetic? And what did that mean in terms of the game or its magic system?

"This basic ability gives rise to what we call *Communion*," Abigail continued. "This is a special form of empathy that allows us to identify with other living creatures more easily – but it is much more powerful than that. It allows us to connect with other plants and animals."

Abigail's gaze swept across the class. "Can anyone tell me the three classes who can use *Communion*?"

A girl raised her hand. "There are Tamers, Growers, and Shifters," she said shyly.

"That's right! Tamers are able to connect with an animal companion, and over time, this bond can provide their companion with increasing bonuses. For example, enhanced intelligence and other stat increases." Abigail rubbed Herbert's furry head with a finger as she said this, and he closed his eyes in momentary bliss, leaning against her.

"In contrast, Growers connect with plants," Abigail continued. "This involves much more than a water mage's ability to manipulate plant growth. Growers can actually ask plants to respond to their requests, growing fabulous gardens and structures. They can also use their abilities both offensively and defensively. The applications are quite extraordinary.

"And, finally, we have Shifters. This group is able to identify with specific types of animals, and, over time, they are able to assume the same form. This provides impressive increases in speed, strength, and flexibility."

Frank was just staring at Abigail now. Was she saying that the game had created an entire class system based around the concept of empathy? And not weak, touchy-feely classes either. He keenly remembered being knocked out and bound by a group of Growers. Oh,

and poisoned. He remembered the poison part well.

He was kind of stunned.

Although, it did raise an important question.

"Um, but why would these groups be hunted by other people? You mentioned that Haven was created as a refuge. Why?"

Abigail's expression fell, and Herbert looked at her woefully, patting her ear in a reassuring way from his position on her shoulder. "The other mage guilds saw us as a threat – something that they couldn't understand. We undermined a system that they saw as pristine, and they took away a different message from our lack of affinities.

"In short, they claimed that we weren't human," Abigail said softly. "Or that we lacked a soul. What else would you call something that doesn't have the same behavior or personality as you? Besides, many people already look at plants and animals as something lesser than humans since they don't think or act the same way, so it is easy to make the same jump to the people that can empathize with them."

Her gaze skimmed across the students. "This is why you need to be careful. If you venture outside of Haven, you shouldn't reveal where you are from or what you can do. There is nothing wrong with these abilities, but other people may not be able to understand your gifts."

Frank scratched his head. Abigail's explanation rang true. Humans discriminated among each other for sillier reasons. Yet he also sensed pain in her answer. This could go a long way toward explaining why the people of Haven seemed so suspicious of outsiders, as well as the Council's cryptic remarks about encouraging their people to accept others.

But Silver's point about the residents of Haven being human had been bugging Frank since he had seen her animal-like features and the other demi-humans in Haven. Although, he wasn't sure how to ask his next question tactfully, vividly remembering Silver's reaction earlier when he had tried to pose the same question.

"I'm sorry if this offensive but is everyone in Haven really human?" he asked. "Many seem to have tails or animal-like ears."

Instead of taking offense, Abigail beamed at him happily – her mood rebounding in a flash. "That's a great question! Can anyone answer Frank?" she asked the group.

"My big sister is a Shifter," Sophie spoke up softly from nearby – immediately catching Frank's attention. She wouldn't quite look at him as she spoke.

"She told me that when you get used to shifting into one animal, it becomes harder to change all the way back," Sophie continued. Her eyes were clouded, as though she was staring at some

distant memory. “So, a lot of Shifters have ears or tails even when they are in human form. My mother used to…”

Sophie suddenly stopped, as though she had just realized what she had said. “Uh, never mind,” she added softly.

Frank watched Sophie carefully. There was some connection between her and Silver. A younger sister, perhaps? And what had happened with the girl’s mother? Frank shook his head. This wasn’t the time to dig at what appeared to be an emotional wound.

Sophie’s explanation had at least been helpful. That must mean that all the people he had assumed were demi-human were actually Shifters. Although, if this was common, it didn’t quite explain why Silver had been so upset when he had asked her the same question. He would just have to add that mystery to the growing list.

“Great. Thank you, Sophie,” Abigail said, sympathy in her eyes.

Abigail then surveyed the group of children. “Getting back to the point, you all are much more sensitive to the emotions of others, and you have the potential to become either a Tamer, Shifter, or Grower. The question then is how?”

Abigail raised a finger. “And the answer is by learning the *Communion* skill. You will need to interact with other plants and animals and try to put yourself in their shoes – or paws and roots, I suppose,” she added with a smile.

“Try to think of what it would be like to be a wolf, or a deer, or a tree,” she offered, gesturing at the Ancestor Tree looming above the lake. “Over time, you will naturally get a feel for which of the three roles suits you best. For some people, this can be incredibly easy. For others, it can be a bit difficult – so it is important not to get frustrated.”

Her eyes darted to Frank. “This is especially true as a person gets older. As we grow in experience, it can be harder to connect with other living things. We sometimes build up barriers in our mind – both intentionally and unwittingly.

“So, today we’re going to practice!” Abigail announced with a smile, gesturing at one of the guards on the ridge.

A whistle went up from the edge of the valley, and suddenly flowers began blooming in the field, a colorful rainbow blanket of petals unfolding before Frank’s eyes. At the same time, a group of animals of all shapes and sizes drifted over the ridge and wandered down into the circular valley. He saw birds and lizards mixed with more dangerous creatures – wolves, mountain lions, and bears.

The children all let out shouts of glee, immediately racing through the blooming plants to pet the animals. Frank’s hands clenched into fists, worry welling in his stomach at the sight of human children playing with dangerous animals. He saw several children

jump on top of a fully grown bear, and the animal simply rolled onto its back – being careful not to harm any of the kids.

"They'll be fine," Abigail spoke up from his elbow. At some point, the small bubbly woman had slumped down in the grass next to him. "The animals are all companions of various Tamers. They tend to be more open to creating the empathic link in the first place."

"Were you using magic to pick up on my anxiety?" Frank asked with a wry grin.

Abigail laughed cheerfully. "No! You just looked pale and reached for a weapon that you don't have. Not all empathy is about some sort of pseudo-telepathy. We still have eyes, after all, and body language can be quite expressive. A large part of using *Communion* is simply about being *open* – being perceptive."

Frank couldn't help but match her smile. She seemed much more kind than the others he had met in Haven so far – despite the hamster that continued to glare at him from her shoulder.

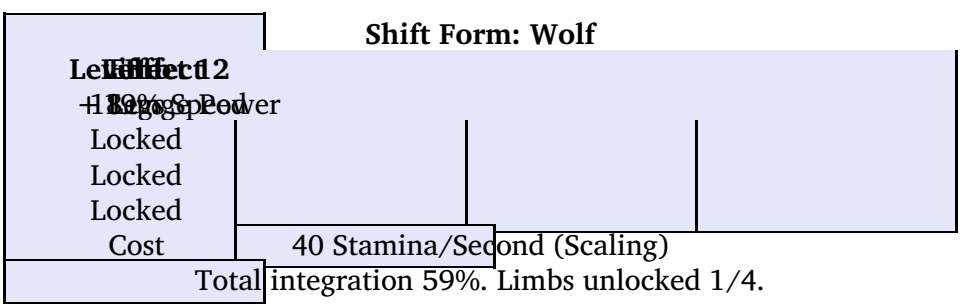
"Aren't you nervous that I'm part of some cultist group?" he asked. "You seem much more relaxed than everyone else," he said, gesturing at a nearby guard who kept glancing not-so-discreetly in Frank's direction.

Abigail waved a dismissive hand. "I don't get the sense that you want to harm anyone. If anything, you just feel confused. But maybe I can help with that. Why don't you explain how your *shift* works?"

And so, Frank outlined what he knew about his *Consume* ability. There wasn't all that much to explain when he got down to it. He killed creatures and then ate their hearts. But he had reached an impasse where he didn't seem to be gaining new abilities. When he explained that he could only shift individual limbs, Abigail frowned, her brow pinched in thought. The expression seemed out of place on her usually cheerful face.

"Could you show me your screen?" she asked.

"Oh… sure," Frank answered slowly, bringing up his UI with a few quick swipes. A screen soon appeared, and he rotated it so that Abigail could see.



“Hmm, you do seem like you should have unlocked other limbs,” she murmured. “Actually, you should already be able to do a full shift. Strange…”

“Is it bad that I can’t do a full shift?” Frank asked, confused. Her tone made it sound like that was a problem.

“Generally speaking, yes,” Abigail replied, biting at her lip. “As your screen shows, each limb has a specific function and set of abilities. They also level individually. You can sort of think of them like upgradeable items. When you are able to fully shift, you get something like a set bonus. So, a full-body shift can be quite powerful.”

Shit, Frank thought to himself.

“Oh, don’t worry!” Abigail reassured him, picking up on his expression. “At least not yet. Let’s see if we can teach you *Communion* first. That might help break you through this barrier and give you something to replace this *Consume* ability – which sounds a little gross if you ask me.”

“How exactly do I do that?” Frank asked.

Abigail’s smile widened. “By trying to connect with another animal, of course.” She hesitated for a moment, biting at her lip in thought. “But let me just try something first.” She reached out her fingers, and Frank reflexively backed away.

“Don’t worry, this won’t hurt you,” Abigail explained.

Frank was skeptical – to say the least. The last time he had participated in a magic ritual in-game, his best friend had slit his wrist over a dark-mana well.

However, this woman had been kind to him, and so he let her fingers gently rest against his scalp. Frank wasn’t able to see what happened, but he felt a strange tingle along his skin, and then he could sense a foreign presence. It was hard to pinpoint or describe. He caught just the fleeting image of a green field full of animals, and then it was gone.

Frank blinked rapidly, refocusing on Abigail’s face. Her carefree expression was gone, twisted in a frown and her eyes dark and clouded. “What is it?” Frank asked, concerned at her reaction. “What’s wrong?”

“I-I’m not sure,” Abigail replied, staring at him, but her attention clearly fixed on something he couldn’t see. “It feels like something is… twisted or broken. Or trapped maybe? And I sensed something darker – something hungry. I have felt a similar sensation when connected to other predators but never in a human before.”

Abigail shook her head, looking at Frank in a new light. “Why

don't you work with Herbert? He may best match your nature." A small smile lit her face again. "Besides being adorable, he's also quite the social butterfly."

Herbert looked at Abigail in surprise, shaking his head as though refusing. "Please, Herbert, as a favor to me?" Abigail whispered to the hamster. He looked at Frank and then back at the woman several times before letting out a sigh. Herbert reluctantly jumped off Abigail's shoulder and hit the ground with a soft thud. He approached Frank, observing him skeptically.

"So just try to *connect* with Herbert. Clear your mind and focus only on him. Try to guess at what he's thinking and feeling. Don't worry if this takes a little bit of time. Just try to focus," Abigail explained patiently.

She looked up and noticed another student had fallen and scraped their knee. Tears were already starting to fall. "Oh my, I need to go take care of that. I'll leave you and Herbert to it!"

Abigail spared one final look at the hamster before she left. "Be nice and please don't hurt him. You got me in a lot of trouble with Leandra last time." With that cryptic parting statement, Abigail abruptly left.

Frank simply stared at the hamster, wondering how something so tiny and plump could possibly be a threat. Maybe someone had tripped over him? Although he had to admit that *something* about the creature was weird. He was alarmingly intelligent and didn't seem at all nervous about working with a hulking barbarian Shifter. It also hadn't helped that Herbert had locked eyes with Frank when Abigail had mentioned harming someone, as if to say, "You better watch it, bro."

"Uh, okay, so how do we do this?" Frank asked the hamster.

Herbert let out a sigh and rubbed at his head, a sure sign of frustration in a human person. Maybe that could be the first emotion Frank could empathize with – or at least relate to. This whole process felt super vague and confusing. But if it meant that he could continue to grow in power, then so be it.

With a sigh of his own, Frank settled into a comfortable position and locked eyes with the hamster. It was going to be a long morning.

Chapter 8 - Frustrating

Frank stared into Herbert's beady little black eyes. The hamster kept scrunching up his forehead and winking at him, throwing Frank off. The last couple of hours had proven to be completely fruitless. No matter how hard he focused or what he tried, he couldn't get inside the hamster's head. Hell, just the idea that he was sitting in a field with a group of children and trying to empathize with a hamster was pretty cringe-worthy.

He could already visualize the video on Vermillion Live. "Want to maximize your DPS and level faster? Check out this tutorial of the left hand of the Twilight Throne attending a children's class and staring at a hamster for hours."

Frank let out a heavy sigh. On top of his growing frustration with Herbert, the sound of children talking cheerfully in the background as they easily performed the same task was particularly grating. Suddenly, he shot to his feet and began pacing back and forth through the grass. He just needed to burn off a little steam.

He heard a faint giggle and turned back to find Herbert imitating him, staggering around on his hind legs with his furry little belly pushed out. When he saw Frank watching, he gave him a completely unapologetic look that seemed to say, "What are you going to do about it, huh?"

Perfect, now the hamster is mocking me!

The giggling had come from Sophie. She had snuck over to Frank and Herbert near the edge of the field. As Herbert saw the young girl, he scurried over and nestled in her lap, closing his eyes slightly as she rubbed his head.

"He's such a cute little guy," she said, scratching his chin.

Frank muttered under his breath, "No, he's a pain in my ass."

He was pretty sure that the only reason he couldn't connect with Herbert was because the hamster was evil incarnate. The furry little asshole would probably get along great with the Hippie. Herbert seemed to use every opportunity to mock and berate Frank – all silently of course. The hamster must be a grandmaster mime.

"He's, uh, something. That's for sure," Frank offered in a louder voice.

Herbert seemed to understand the subtext of his statement, and Frank could have sworn he grinned at him. Could hamsters even grin? This did nothing to ease the burning frustration in Frank's belly. Perhaps he could figure out a way to have Herbert die accidentally.

Maybe he could trip and just… step on him.

Sophie ran a hand down the hamster's fur. "You're having trouble connecting, aren't you?"

Frank rubbed at his neck, swallowing his frustration. He had to remind himself that he was probably talking to Silver's – or Ana's – younger sister. "You could say that. I just don't understand this *Communion* thing. As he stared pointedly at the irritating little creature, he muttered, "Or maybe Herbert and I aren't a good pairing."

Sophie reached out and tapped her index finger against Herbert's head. A tendril of multi-colored energy wound around her finger before drifting into Herbert's mouth, nose, and ears. He suddenly sat up straight, staring fully into Sophie's eyes in rapt attention. With another tap, Sophie released the spell and Herbert nestled back into her lap for more petting.

"How did you do that?" Frank asked, moving closer. That was the first time he had seen the *Communion* ability in action. Abigail had used the ability on him, but he hadn't gotten a good look at the spell. He hadn't even known what he was looking for – a point that Abigail had seemed to think was a benefit. She had given him some spiel about the importance of intuition about an hour ago.

Sophie cocked her head in thought, her nose scrunching in concentration. "It's sort of like knocking on a door. I asked for permission to enter, and then he let me in."

Well, that's as clear as mud, Frank thought dryly.

With a sigh, he decided to change the subject. He was clearly making no progress today, so he might as well learn more about these people. "So why did Abigail choose a hamster as a pet?" Frank asked, gesturing toward the cheerful woman, who was still making the rounds of the students.

When he turned back to the pair, both Herbert and Sophie were now staring at him with incredulous, shocked expressions – like he had just said he wanted to massacre Herbert's entire little furry family. He might have been *thinking* that, but he certainly hadn't said it. Although, he was beginning to wonder if it had slipped out accidentally.

"Herbert is a *death hamster*," Sophie whispered, trying to hold her fingers over Herbert's ears as he squirmed in her lap. The hamster seemed to be trying to leap at Frank.

"A death hamster?" Frank questioned. "He looks pretty normal. Maybe even a little overweight. Maybe you meant that he's a diabetes hamster?"

Herbert gnashed his little teeth and almost wiggled out of Sophie's grasp – presumably to get some sort of revenge on Frank. Not

that Frank was particularly worried. He felt reasonably confident he could manage the handful of fur. Herbert twisted the wrong way, falling out of Sophie's lap where he tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Frank couldn't help but smile as he watched the pudgy little creature try to regain his feet, and Sophie's giggle filled the air again as she set him back on his feet. He brushed himself off with a paw and then retreated into Sophie's lap with an indignant huff, glaring at Frank.

"What is going on here?"

Frank winced – immediately recognizing the voice.

He turned to find Silver staring at the pair, her blue eyes hard as ice and just as unrelenting. "I thought I told you to stay away from the traveler," Silver said, addressing Sophie.

The little girl hung her head, looking sad and cradling Herbert in her hands.

"Hey, she was just giving me a hand," Frank interjected. "I've been trying to grasp this *Communion* thing and just can't get it. So, Sophie showed me on Herbert."

Silver spared Frank a sharp glare before turning back to her sister.

"I was just trying to help," Sophie murmured, not quite able to meet Silver's eyes.

"I know you were," Silver said, her tone softening. "But go back to the rest of the class. The traveler is dangerous."

Sophie set Herbert down carefully and then spared one last look at Frank. He waved at her. "Thanks for your help, Sophie," he said kindly.

As the girl retreated, Frank turned back to Silver. "You didn't have to be so hard on her. I'm certainly not going to hurt a kid."

"Really? Because I saw you eat a dire bear's heart with your bare hands. Do you even understand what your ability entails? That was your purpose in coming here, wasn't it? To learn?"

"Sure, but are you really implying that I could or would *Consume* a human? That's ridiculous," Frank retorted.

"Really? Have you actually tried using it on another person?" Silver demanded, her eyes piercing and her hands on her hips.

Frank had to hesitate at that question. Would his *Consume* ability actually work on a human person? He honestly wasn't sure, although the thought of eating someone's heart was enough to make him recoil. He might have gotten a little numb to handling Jason's "crafting materials," but that was still taking it way too far. He would have to draw the line at cannibalism.

Putting that aside, did Silver really think he'd try to eat a little girl's heart? He could feel a kernel of anger flare to life in his chest,

fed by hours of dealing with Herbert and unsuccessfully trying to unlock *Communion*.

"No and I don't plan to find out either," Frank said firmly, meeting Silver's eyes. "Besides, your sister is an incredibly sweet and compassionate person. I would never harm her. For a people that claim they practice empathy, yours seems to be in short supply."

Her sapphire eyes widened in surprise, and he saw the hair on her arms raise slightly. "Either way, it seems this morning has been a *failure*," Silver retorted, switching the subject abruptly. "You haven't learned *Communion*."

Frank let out a frustrated snort. "No, I haven't. This doesn't seem like it's going to work. Abigail mentioned something about children being more open to this process. Maybe this just isn't the right way for me to learn."

"Or maybe you need to try for more than a few hours," Silver retorted sarcastically. "This process works for nearly everyone. Even the slowest students eventually master this simple ability. Besides, it is safer to keep you here where we can keep an eye on you."

Silver's barb just fanned the flames of Frank's anger further. "Or maybe you're just trying to ditch the direct order that your *father* gave you," he said forcefully.

Silver let out a low growl and took a measured step toward Frank. "What do you mean by that? I have followed the Elder Shifter's instructions to the letter."

"Oh really? Because I recall him saying that you should train me yourself, not pawn me off on someone else," Frank said, refusing to back down. He paced forward until the pair were only a few feet away, staring each other down. His anger was giving him courage – even though he could see the guards along the ridge surrounding the valley shift uncomfortably at their raised voices and their hands reach for their weapons.

"Why don't I just head back over to that hall and have a word with Alderas himself?" Frank taunted. "We can let him decide whether you dropping me off here with a bunch of school children and then peacing out meets the *spirit* of his order?"

"Hey, what's going on over here?" Abigail suddenly chirped, appearing beside the pair – who were glaring daggers at each other.

"Nothing!" they both snapped at the same time.

"Oh, well that's a relief," Abigail replied, retreating a step. "Because it sort of looks like you two are about to kill each other… in front of a bunch of children."

Silver's eyes flashed at that comment, and she bared her teeth, a low growl rumbling from her throat. "If only. Frank here was just explaining that he doesn't think your instructions are sufficient. Or

perhaps he's simply too slow to grasp them."

Frank could feel his own rage bubbling in his veins now, refusing to drop his gaze as he stared Silver down. He'd had enough of this. In a single day, his sister had ranted at him, he had stepped in bear shit, he'd been kidnapped, and then nearly been executed. Oh, and he'd been taunted for a few hours by a pudgy *death hamster*. He was reaching his limit.

He was done backing down.

"Or maybe you need to actually try teaching me," Frank retorted. "Unless you are scared…" he baited her, letting the implication of his words hang in the air.

There was a flash of anger in the young woman's eyes, and she let out another growl. Then a sudden smile twisted Silver's lips. "You know what, perhaps you're right. We *should* try something different. Assuming you aren't afraid of a real test of your commitment."

"Bring it on," Frank replied firmly.

Silver's smile widened further, her sharp canines now visible. "Perfect. Then we leave for the Chasm today."

Abigail gasped slightly. "Oh my, that's really not..."

"Fine," Frank interjected. "Unlike some people, I don't back down from a challenge."

The wolf girl's teeth were now fully bared, the hair on her arms and tail standing upright. If there hadn't been a class of students nearby, Frank suspected she might have already *shifted* and attacked him. Some still-sane part of his mind reminded him feebly that this girl could turn into a massive wolf, but he squashed that irritating voice quickly.

"Good," she bit out harshly. "We leave in the next hour. Meet me by the lodge; we will run with the hunting pack." With that, she abruptly turned on her heel and stalked toward the ridge – transforming after just a few steps.

As Silver's four-legged form disappeared over the ridgeline, Abigail let out a soft sigh. "This is a terrible idea," she murmured. As Frank looked back at her, he finally saw the worry etched across her normally carefree face. Even Herbert was looking at him skeptically as he scurried up Abigail's pant leg and retook his position on her shoulder.

What exactly did I just sign up for?

The niggling doubt was already trying to worm its way in. Was he really up for this? He had no idea what this Chasm was or what he might face. He also didn't have his weapons or any of his equipment. However, one thing was certain, Silver wasn't going to go easy on him – not after he had challenged her in public. Not to mention his luck hadn't exactly been awesome lately.

Regardless, he didn't care. His anger lent him strength. He was getting tired of being a doormat. And if this "Chasm" could really help him learn *Communion* and improve his abilities, then so be it.

Plus, a part of him desperately wanted to see the look on Silver's face when he faced and defeated her challenge.

Chapter 9 - Observant

Frank had been standing next to the meeting lodge for almost forty minutes. He had tried his best to ignore the stares of the passing townsfolk – which ranged from openly hostile to just suspicious. So, not awkward at all.

The wait had also given him plenty of time for his anger to cool and to consider whether he had made a terrible mistake in accepting Silver's challenge.

He could still visualize her almost predatory expression, the hair on her arms raised, and her teeth bared in ferocious challenge. Anything that made Silver happy was bound to be something he would regret. To make matters worse, he had been told firmly by the guards inside the lodge that his equipment would not be returned to him until he "earned his place" in the pack. So, he was going to be unarmed for whatever Silver had planned for him. He would just have to hope that his *Bear Form* would be enough to compensate.

Frank stood up straighter as he saw Silver round a nearby building with four other townsfolk in tow. She scowled when she saw Frank waiting – possibly hoping that he would chicken out. Silver had switched out of her lighter clothing, and now thick white furs were wrapped around her lithe frame, reminding him of her wolf form.

As she neared, Silver just grunted at him, pointing her chin in his direction. "This is Frank – the traveler we're going to be babysitting."

Frank bit back a retort, glaring at her. While his anger had waned before, he felt it surge back to life now. This woman just had a way of getting under his skin.

Multiple sets of eyes trained on Frank, but he saw no remorse or affection in their gaze. They were all similarly attired in heavy winter gear and carried packs. For the first time, Frank started to wonder where exactly this Chasm was located – and how far they would have to travel to get there. However, he didn't exactly get a chance to ask.

Silver gestured at the men around her. "This is my hunting pack. Runner, Howl, Hoot, and Spider." She named them off in quick succession, not really giving Frank a chance to place a name with a face.

"The corrupted one is not much to look at," a large, bearded man drawled to his packmates, giving Frank a dismissive once-over. He vaguely seemed to recall that his name was Howl. "With the way

Silver talked about him, I was expecting more."

"Yeah, well neither is Spider, but he still packs a punch," a younger man retorted. He was the most junior member of the pack and couldn't have been more than 20 years old. His eyes were sort of eerie. They seemed a tad too wide for his face, and they shone slightly as the light hit them. He stuck out a hand at Frank. "I'm Hoot, pleasure to meet you."

Frank shook his hand tentatively, surprised at the open smile on his face. "Uh, you too."

The other two didn't bother to greet him. One was a slender, stoic man. His eyes skimmed over Frank, but he saw no emotion there – merely a calm precision. Frank assumed this was Spider. The other was a gruff man around the same age as Howl. By process of elimination, Frank could only assume this was Runner. He looked back and forth between Runner and Howl, noticing that both men were bearded and had the same blocky cheekbones and sturdy frame. Brothers maybe?

"Alright, now that we're all best friends, let's move," Silver said in a sarcastic tone. "We have a long way to go, and we're burning daylight."

With that, Silver hefted her pack and started heading directly east. The rest of the hunting pack moved to follow her automatically, immediately dismissing Frank.

Frank let out a soft sigh before following them. Silver was right. This was going to be a long trip, but for a much different reason than she likely intended. He wore plain cloth clothing and had no armor, no bags, or weapons. Oh, and his new teammates all seemed either indifferent or openly hostile.

"Don't worry too much about her," Hoot said, interrupting Frank's dark thoughts. He looked up to find the young man staring at him from a few feet away, his strange unblinking eyes trained on Frank's face. "Silver can be a little… feisty."

"I hadn't noticed," Frank replied dryly.

He hesitated, watching the other pack members ahead as he tried to decide how to frame his next question. "What's her problem, anyway? I get that there is no love lost for the cultists here, but you seem friendly enough, and I've met other people here who were kind. Silver just seems to have a grudge against me or something."

Hoot hesitated for a moment. "Hmm, that's sort of a touchy subject. Besides, we would need to put a little more distance between her and us before I'd be willing to tell that story." At this comment, he gestured at Silver's back.

Frank noted the way that the young woman's wolf-like ears twitched slightly at Hoot's comment. *Shit, is her hearing better in human*

form? He'd have to keep that in mind.

"Anyway, in my case, my *friendliness* is more out of self-interest," Hoot continued with a grin, side-eyeing Frank. "As you might imagine, we don't get to hear many stories of the world outside of Haven. Tell me everything!"

"Uh, okay. How much do you know about the Twilight Throne?" Frank began.

As Frank tried to sate what he soon discovered to be Hoot's bottomless curiosity, the group quickly traveled out of Haven proper and into the dense forest that rested on the eastern side of the village.

Upon entering the trees, it immediately became apparent how the Growers spent most of their time. The forest near the village had been largely repurposed, with elevated beds attached to the trees. The platforms had been carefully grown to create an intricate lattice of limbs that grew directly out of each trunk. The planters appeared to be a few feet deep and were filled with dark soil. Each bed contained fledgling and fully-grown plants sprouting from the dirt.

The hunting pack passed many Growers, who moved along the ground below the trees, whispering softly and occasionally touching a trunk. This would cause the planters to shift up and around the trees, moving some plants into the shade and others into a position above the canopy where they could get direct sunlight. Another group of Growers helped water the planters as they were lowered to the ground, revealing rows upon rows of plants that Frank couldn't identify.

What was even more impressive was the scale of this operation. Dozens – if not hundreds – of trees had been dedicated to this purpose. As they walked through the forest, Frank's eyes were wide, watching as the planters slowly rose and fell around them.

Damn. Eliza would have a field day here.

"Neat system, isn't it?" Hoot observed, following Frank's gaze. "The Growers are responsible for most of the valley's food supply. Some of the beds contain edible grains, greens, and root vegetables, while others grow medicinal herbs to treat injuries and disease."

"It's kind of amazing," Frank murmured. It made Cecil's underground facility look like child's play. Although, he supposed the pseudo-druids were at an advantage since they could manipulate the plants directly.

"We're actually fully self-sufficient here in the valley," Hoot continued with a nod. "The forest east of Haven is devoted to agriculture, and, once we pass through the tree line, you'll see the plains and the stockade."

True to his word, the group soon emerged from the forest into a rocky pasture. The vegetation looked like it had been intentionally cut

back, creating a rough, uneven plain unmarred by tree cover. Sunlight shone down on the thick grass that sprang out from between the stones that littered the field. A herd of what appeared to be some sort of extremely fat goats traversed the plain. Although, Frank had to do a doubletake as he realized that instead of a snout, each creature's mouth terminated in a long beak which it used to snap at the grass.

"Snaphooves," Hoot said. "They can be a little testy, but they're delicious."

"Wait, so you actually eat them?" Frank asked in surprise.

"Sure, why not?" Hoot asked, staring back him with a confused expression.

"Uh, well I guess I just assumed that your empathic abilities would make that difficult. You know, eating other creatures?"

Hoot just shrugged. "It's difficult to replace meat in our diets, and this is a natural process. Other animals have no compunction about eating one another, after all. The snaphooves also have a rather short life cycle. They produce a rich milk, and then we butcher the older members of the flock and many of the bucks. Then we repurpose their hides into clothing and other tools. Little goes to waste."

Hoot shrugged. "Besides, some of the predator companions also require a regular diet of meat." He pointed at the far end of the field where Frank could see a few wooden structures nestled up against a rocky cliff. "The Tamers maintain some pens over there for the larger animals. Some of them don't really mix well inside of Haven."

"What do you mean by companions? Like Abigail's pet hamster?" Frank asked, his brow wrinkling in confusion.

Hoot barked out a laugh. "I wouldn't call Herbert a hamster to his face. He can be… testy. And dangerous. It's also sort of bad form to call them *pets*. But to answer your question, yes. Herbert is Abigail's companion. Most Tamers have at least one. For instance…" Hoot trailed off, turning his eyes to the sky.

A moment later, a large white owl – its wingspan stretching nearly six feet – dove out of the clouds, letting out a screech. With claws raised, the animal speared directly toward Frank. He dove to the side, trying to avoid the massive bird. His shoulder slammed into the ground hard, and he rolled, kicking up dust.

He heard a chuckle and looked up to find the owl perched on Hoot's arm, although the young man seemed to struggle to hold her weight. "Frank, meet Archimedes – or Archie for short."

The other members of the hunting pack had turned to look at the commotion, and both Runner and Howl laughed when they saw Frank's prone form. Frank even thought he caught a flash of amusement in Silver's eyes before she turned away. He struggled back to his feet, dusting the dirt off his clothing and trying not to feel

stupid.

It didn't work.

"You could have warned me," Frank muttered.

"Where's the fun in that?" Hoot replied with a grin. "Besides, Archie found it rather flattering that you were so scared of her. Isn't that right, my brilliant beauty?" he cooed at the bird, rubbing her head.

"Anyway, Archie here is my companion," Hoot explained, glancing back at Frank. "Most Tamers bond to a specific animal – usually for life. I'm sure Abigail explained the advantages of this bond. The creature's stats and intelligence increase over time, and they can level with the Tamer. We can also share each other's senses."

Frank's eyes widened at that explanation. Now that was a cool feature. A bird companion would make Hoot an excellent scout. Frank made a mental note to mention this to Jason – assuming he survived whatever Silver had in store for him.

Archie hooted softly, rubbed her head against Hoot for a moment, and then took off, quickly soaring into the sky. Frank followed her form until she disappeared into the clouds.

"Come on," Hoot said, patting Frank on the back. "We need to keep moving, or we'll get left behind!"

As the pair continued their march, Frank's thoughts were on Haven. He shook his head in wonder. What had once seemed like a quaint druid village had turned out to be a large-scale operation. Granted, they were far out in the mountains, but it was surprising that no one had discovered the narrow valley. At least, he hadn't noticed any players so far – only NPCs. Why hadn't anyone found this place?

There was also another question that had been bugging him about Hoot's explanation. "Why do you need a hunting pack if you grow all of your own food and raise your own livestock?" Frank asked, gesturing at Silver and the other pack members ahead of them.

Hoot nodded, his expression sobering. "Fair question. Although, I guess I need to answer it with another question. Do you only hunt for food?"

Frank stared at him for a second in surprise. "Uh, I guess not? But then what do you hunt?"

"In short, anything that might threaten the valley or reveal its existence," Hoot said somberly. The man wouldn't quite meet Frank's eyes as he said this.

"Wait… so are you the guys that captured me?" Frank asked, the pieces suddenly clicking together. Now he could start to understand the strange, dismissive glances the others had given him.

"Maybe," Hoot replied, a coy grin sweeping across his face. "Although, if it makes you feel any better, you nearly caught up to

Silver before she made it into that glade. She was… not happy."

Frank chewed on that piece of information. He hadn't seen the pack before they struck, and they had incapacitated him quickly. From what he could tell, they also had a balanced team. His guess was that Hoot acted as their scout, with Runner, Howl, and Silver serving as their muscle. Frank's eyes hovered on Spider's back – recalling Sthren and the quiet Growers they had passed in the forest. He assumed the nearly mute man must be their Grower.

In any event, the takeaway was clear. These people were not to be trifled with.

The pair lapsed into silence as they continued heading east. The elevation steepened considerably as they walked, traveling ever upward. At the same time, the mountains encircling Haven soon tapered until nearly vertical stone ridges towered on either side of them, creating a narrow pass. Frank spared a glance behind him and saw the valley stretch out below him, a thin strip of green sandwiched between the snowcapped mountains.

He couldn't help but notice that the weather had worsened with each step, patches of snow and ice now dotting the rocky path and a stiff wind barreling down the pass. Frank shivered slightly against the cold – starting to regret his light clothing even more. The clouds that hovered over the valley had also grown much more dense, blotting out the sunlight with a roiling gray mass.

So, the game also had realistic weather. Perfect.

This raised yet another question.

"Why is it getting so cold all of a sudden?" Frank asked Hoot. The man had already pulled his furred hood up around his face. "There hasn't been that much change in elevation, but it was *much* warmer down in the valley."

"Hmm," Hoot murmured, his eyes darting to the other pack members ahead of them. He seemed to be chewing on his answer, trying to decide how to frame it.

"Haven is actually built on a hot spring – hence the dense vegetation and warmth. The valley is also narrow enough that the surrounding mountains ward off most of the snow and wind. However, once we exit the valley, that protection ends abruptly. You are starting to feel it now, but you'll truly see the difference in just a moment," he offered, pointing to the group ahead.

Hoot's explanation sort of made sense, but it also didn't quite feel as natural as he made it seem. Frank looked behind him, noting the way that the cloud cover only broke over the valley, sunlight streaming down through the clouds. Even putting aside the weird cloud formations, would a hot spring really explain the sharp difference in temperature?

“You two, hurry up,” Silver shouted back at them, interrupting his thoughts.

Hoot and Frank hurried to catch up, assembling with the rest of the pack in front of what appeared to be a massive clump of ice that blocked the narrow pass. A light dusting of snow now covered the ground, and Frank crossed his arms and rubbed the skin with his palms in an attempt to generate some heat.

He eyed the miniature glacier skeptically. It was at least twenty feet wide and at least as many feet thick, obscuring the sight of anything on the other side. Frank looked left and right, but he didn’t see any obvious way to get around the obstacle. Maybe they intended to climb it or… something?

Silver knelt beside the glacier and murmured something under her breath. As she finished speaking, the ice melted away before Frank’s eyes, drifting off to either side of the path and reforming into a pair of perfectly flat walls, creating a slender tunnel.

“What the hell?” Frank muttered.

“It’s easier if you think of the ice like a front door,” Hoot quipped, noticing Frank’s confusion. That cryptic advice did little to ease Frank’s confusion, and the others barely acknowledged their conversation as they continued through the icy pass – as though this was routine.

As the group made it through the ice, a blast of cold air struck Frank full in the face. A dense, heavy snow fell on the other side of the pass, the icy fragments latching to Frank’s skin and flimsy clothing. The snow obscured his sight, and he could barely see more than a few yards in any given direction. The area outside the valley was also coated in ice and snow, and Frank’s feet now sank several inches into the loose powder with each step.

Hoot hadn’t been kidding about the weather.

Once the entire group exited the pass, Silver approached the ice again, mumbling something under her breath. The ice swiftly reformed, flowing back together to form a single enormous block. The glacier also blended in seamlessly with the area on the other side of the pass, appearing to be just another icy ridge. If Frank hadn’t known the glacier was there, he doubted he would have even noticed it.

Frank just stood staring at the ice blocking the pass.

This wasn’t some sort of empathic bond. This had to be the work of water magic. That was the only way to explain the way the ice conveniently blocked the entrance to the valley and the way it had shifted aside to let them pass. Could these druids also manipulate water mana? Or maybe just Silver? That didn’t really seem to be consistent with Abigail’s explanation of the nature of their abilities.

However, he didn’t get long to ponder on this. The wind had

picked up dramatically, and Frank rubbed at his arms more desperately now, trying to retain the last traces of warmth that still lingered from their march through the valley. The cold was biting, the wind and snow stinging his skin.

A notification flashed in his peripheral vision.

System Notice

This area is cold and suffers from inclement weather. You are poorly attired for these conditions, and as a result, your health and stamina regeneration have both been reduced by 50%.

If you do not find suitable clothing within the next hour, the debuff will worsen, and you may die.

"Oh, that's just fucking perfect," Frank muttered, swiping the notification aside.

He noticed that the rest of the group had bundled up tightly in thick furs, their hoods now obscuring their faces to ward off the frigid wind.

Yet Frank didn't have the equipment for this. Thinking quickly, he shifted his legs into their *Wolf Form*, his knees inverting with a pop as thick black hair sprouted from his skin. This lessened the debuff but didn't remove it. The notification now said the debuff would worsen in three hours – a minor improvement at least.

A glance at his Character Status confirmed that his reduced stamina regen meant that he couldn't maintain both his *Wolf Form* and *Bear Form* simultaneously. This meant that his chest and arms were still largely unprotected. He suspected that his stamina would begin to swiftly deplete as they hiked through the mountains. At some point, he might even lose the ability to maintain his *Wolf Form*.

This wasn't even close to a long-term solution.

Hoot glanced over at him, and Silver's ears twitched subtly as they noticed Frank muttering under his breath. "What's wrong?" Hoot asked.

"Apparently, I may freeze to death soon," Frank replied evenly, trying not to shiver. "I'm assuming no one else brought any extra gear or clothing?"

"You are not a member of…" Howl began.

"…the pack. Yeah, I got that," Frank said dryly.

"You'll just have to suffer through or find some way to equip

yourself along the way," Silver said harshly. "Unless you'd like to return to the valley, of course."

Frank couldn't easily see her face now that her hood was up, only the flash of her white teeth in what he assumed was a taunting smile. Although it did little to ward off the cold, her comment did help fan the angry ember in his chest. His irritation had begun to dwindle during their march and Hoot's helpful tour of the valley, but now he felt it reignite and he clung to that emotion like a lifeline.

"Not a chance," Frank said forcefully – trying his best to keep his teeth from chattering. That would have sort of undermined his determination. However, he couldn't entirely stop the shivering now.

"Then let's keep moving," Silver said, before marching off toward the east. "The Chasm is still a long way away, and I'd like to find a place to make camp before we lose the light," she called over her shoulder. The others followed closely behind her.

Only Hoot hesitated, biting at his lip and clearly not comfortable letting Frank walk through the snow without proper clothing. He ultimately shook his head in resignation before hurrying after the others.

Frank stared after the group as their dark forms slowly disappeared into the dense snowfall. He let out a sigh, his breath causing a heavy vapor to fill the air. Within moments, the moisture clung to his chin, freezing into icy fragments. Under other circumstances, the surrounding landscape might have been beautiful, but with the wind and snow whipping at his bare skin, it just looked like an ivory hellscape.

His eyes soon centered on Silver's retreating back, and her taunting expression flashed through his mind's eye once more. He felt his determination harden. He had no idea how he was going to survive this. But he sure as hell wasn't going to give her the pleasure of giving up.

Chapter 10 - Frozen

Frank was cold.

Actually, “cold” didn’t quite cut it.

He was fucking freezing. Not in the figurative way most people used that expression. He was literally freezing. Ice was actually forming on his skin, and he couldn’t feel his fingers anymore. The game’s pain feedback system might not be 100% realistic, but even 50% was enough to reinforce that he had made a very stupid decision. The shards of ice and stinging snow that stabbed into his uncovered face really helped drive that point home.

The group was trudging through knee-deep powder now, Frank trailing behind the others. He had long since lost the ability to sustain his *Wolf Form* as the cold debuff worsened. He wasn’t exactly certain how long they had been walking, he just knew that it had been more than long enough.

To make matters worse, the heavy snowfall had not relented for a second, and the other members of the pack were little more than hazy dark shadows ahead of him. The only thing that kept him pressing forward was the fear of losing sight of the others. He knew he would quickly get lost and die amid the swirling white snow, his corpse swiftly buried and frozen on this damnable mountain.

Yet another notification flashed in front of him – the third in the last five minutes.

System Notice

This area is cold and suffers from inclement weather. You are currently suffering from a -85% penalty to health and stamina regeneration.

Prolonged exposure to cold has also begun to cause bodily harm. You are now suffering from frostbite and taking damage at 5 health/second.

If you do not find suitable clothes or cover within the next thirty minutes, you will die. Go figure… Only a moron would wander out into a blizzard in the fantasy equivalent of a t-shirt.

Frank had been ignoring the notices as they steadily worsened, but he couldn't ignore this one. The reduction to his regeneration and the frostbite damage had now passed a tipping point where he was taking more damage than he was able to regen. As a result, his health was slowly decreasing. As if to emphasize the point, an hourglass popped into existence in the corner of his vision with a timer counting down the seconds until he died.

That seems like overkill.

"Well, you look… awful," Hoot suddenly said, his eerie eyes staring out from beneath a heavy hood. Frank hadn't even noticed the man approach through the snow.

"I-I'm… dying," Frank managed to croak out. Talking was rather painful. With his face uncovered, every time he opened his mouth, his saliva began to freeze. "Thirty… m-m-m-minutes."

"Huh, well, that does seem bad," Hoot muttered.

The Tamer glanced toward the remainder of the group where they were retreating through the snow. Their hazy silhouettes were almost invisible now. Then he leaned in closer. "I might actually have a solution for you. Archie spotted something that could help about a hundred yards away. Just walk in that direction." He pointed a finger off to Frank's right.

Frank stared into the storm of white incredulously. If he walked away from the group, he was pretty sure he'd get lost almost instantly, and he suspected that Silver wouldn't go out of her way to send a search party.

"Don't worry," Hoot said, picking up on Frank's unspoken concern. "I won't let you get lost. Not all of us share Silver's… history."

Frank wasn't terribly reassured, but at the same time, what choice did he really have? At the rate he was going, he was going to die anyway. Making a decision, he gave Hoot a curt nod and then headed off in the direction the man had indicated.

"Oh, and look out for the cliff!" Hoot shouted from behind him.

Frank hesitated for a moment. Was he joking? Or was there really a cliff?

Then he shook his head. It didn't matter.

He trudged along with heavy steps. As his stamina waned, every movement took more and more effort – like his limbs were moving through heavy sludge. Yet Frank forced himself to keep moving.

It wasn't until he had already walked for far too long that he realized that Hoot hadn't told him what he was looking for out here.

Frank glanced behind him and couldn't see the others amid the blanket of white that continued to fall all around him. It was at this

point, half-frozen and alone, that some primal part of Frank's mind began to panic. He could feel his heart thumping in his ears, and it felt like a weight had settled on his chest. He knew this wasn't real. He *knew* that. But his brain also knew that it was cold, and he was stranded and dying.

He shifted in the snow, trying to turn around and move back the way he had come. He could already see the holes where his feet had pressed through the snow beginning to fill back up – the wind sweeping the loose powder into the indentations at a frightening rate.

Moving as quickly as he could manage, Frank half-trotted, half-limped back in the direction he had come. Within moments, his footprints disappeared entirely, and the area looked different. He couldn't see any sign that the group had passed through this place.

There was only white.

Had he picked the right direction? Gotten turned around?

His breath was coming in short, frantic gasps now as he tried to tamp down on his rising panic. Each breath caused vapor to puff into the air and then freeze against his skin.

Out of the blinding snowfall, a large ivory mound loomed in front of him. He tried to settle his swirling thoughts. Maybe if he could crest the rise, he could make out the hunting pack's location. It was a plan, at least, and his mind clutched at that small tendril of hope like a lifeline.

As Frank approached the hill and tried to crest its surface, his foot struck something beneath the snow. It felt hard. Almost like a stone was buried beneath the powder.

An avalanche of white snow suddenly exploded into the air, accompanied by a deep-throated snort and rumble. Frank was thrown backward, trying to maintain his footing in the loose powder.

As the snow began to settle, Frank found himself face to face with what looked like an ancient mastodon. Thick, matted hair hung from its torso, and a pair of three-foot-long flat horns jutted from its face. Frank could only assume the animal used the horns like shovels to dig into the snow and bury itself, likely using the material as some sort of insulation – at least, until Frank had run straight onto it.

As the creature's eyes focused on him, Frank knew he should be terrified. Yet he could feel its hot breath on his face, and his eyes were glued to the creature's shaggy gray fur. This creature's skin promised warmth and an escape from the cold. He couldn't think of anything else – focus on anything else. His heart was hammering in his chest now, and red tinged the corners of his vision, although he hadn't summoned his abilities.

He would do anything to survive.

Before he even knew what he was doing, Frank's hands had

already transformed, and long claws stretched from his fingertips. He didn't give the creature a chance to react. Fueled by desperation, pain, and exhaustion, he swept his claws forward and they sank deeply into the creature's flesh.

Frank didn't relent. There was no strategy to his onslaught. It was like a fugue had overtaken him. He only saw red and white. Shouting and screams of pain tore through the frigid mountain air, quickly swept away by the wind. He didn't know whether the noise came from him or the creature.

He clawed at the beast in a frenzy, its bright blood jetting into the air and staining the snow around him a brilliant crimson. He could see misty vapor rise above the liquid. Heat. Blessed heat. A few droplets landed on his skin – the delicious warmth burning after hours spent in the cold. That same primitive part of his brain knew instinctively that this was his salvation.

And so, he tore and ripped and cut.

Only a short time later, Frank stood atop the creature's body, blinking his eyes in confusion as the red lens across his vision dissipated and his sanity slowly returned.

A mantle of thick fur was now wrapped around his shivering body, large patches of the hair stained a mottled red. Rivulets of warm liquid were running down his chest and shoulders, leaving an itching pinprick-like sensation on his still-numb skin. He couldn't help but relish the feeling. He finally felt heat after so long spent in the cold.

The corpse below him had been brutalized, the flesh literally ripped and torn from the creature's body – leaving its muscles and organs exposed. With the surprise attack, the monster had never stood a chance. Staring at the body, Frank could only assume he had burrowed his way into the creature's stomach before it had an opportunity to react. He could still vaguely recall the blessed heat and the thump of the beast's heart before it finally stilled.

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the memory.

He was alive. And, at least for the moment, the notifications had disappeared.

"Oh… oh, shit," someone said from behind him.

Frank whirled, his eyes wide and wild, to find Hoot staring at him. He suddenly realized how this must look – a creature's fresh corpse below him and its still-bloody skin draped across his shoulders. He was already an outcast. Tainted among the others in Haven. He couldn't be certain how the Tamer would react.

He readied himself for a fight, his hands beginning to shift as a deep growl rumbled from his throat. Some still-sane part of his brain questioned this feral response, but he was too tired and cold and confused to care right now.

To his surprise, Hoot relaxed, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “Hey, it’s okay,” he said. “I’m not an enemy.”

Frank slowly relaxed, realizing that Hoot wasn’t planning to attack him. A lopsided grin appeared on the young man’s face as he surveyed the skin draped across Frank’s shoulder. “Well, I guess you took care of your clothing problem.”

Hoot’s eyes skimmed to the corpse. “Although, we probably shouldn’t let the rest of this go to waste.”

Frank’s gaze shifted back and forth between Hoot and the beast. Was the young man suggesting he *Consume* the corpse? It wasn’t a bad idea. He might be able to gain the creature’s natural fur. Some part of him even relished the idea of biting into the still-warm flesh. Frank took a lumbering step toward the beast’s chest but stopped in his tracks as he heard Hoot speak up again.

“You should finish what you started here and cut off a few steaks. It looks like you already carved a nice hole in its side,” Hoot said, half speaking to himself as he inspected the body. “We can’t really haul the whole thing off, but the other wildlife should make short work of the rest.”

Frank froze, looking back at the Tamer. So, he hadn’t been talking about his *Consume* ability. Frank wavered for a moment, trying to decide whether to use his power anyway. But he stopped himself. He had no idea why Hoot was okay with what had just happened, but he wasn’t about to push his luck. He needed these people.

Instead, Frank knelt beside the corpse. With his claws, he tore off great hunks of flesh from the creature’s midsection, placing each bloody steak on the snow beside him. Hoot circled around the body to help. The young man packed snow tightly around each slab of meat before wrapping them in cloth sheets he took from his pack. The snow melted slightly under the heat of the flesh before freezing to the fabric. Hoot then placed each frozen parcel in his pack.

Once they had carved and stored a dozen or so slabs of meat, Hoot patted Frank on the shoulder. “I think that’s enough. We need to move now. If we hurry, we can catch up with the others. We’re not far from the eastern campsite.”

Hoot rose to his feet and offered a hand. Frank released his *Bear Form*, his hands returning to normal. His skin was stained a vivid red all the way up past the elbow, but Hoot didn’t flinch as Frank grabbed his hand and the young man hauled him to his feet.

Hoot pulled Frank close, meeting his eyes. “Just don’t let Silver know I helped you. I’m pretty sure she can hold a grudge until the end of time,” he warned.

Frank could only nod numbly. Hoot released him, and the pair started back through the snow. Frank shifted forward with awkward

steps and pulled the fur more tightly around himself to stave off the ice and snow. Hoot continued to jabber animatedly, apparently unaffected by what had just happened, but Frank wasn't able to concentrate on what he was saying.

Each step washed away some of the blood from Frank's body, leaving a crimson trail in his wake. His health and stamina were also beginning to refill as his natural regeneration took hold.

Yet even as his body began to recover, Frank's mind was still flailing. He couldn't forget what had just happened – that primordial urge that had overtaken him. The way he had clawed hungrily into that creature's flesh. The way his vision had gone red, and he seemed to… lose himself. That wasn't his *Rage* ability. He hadn't used any abilities, at least not consciously.

A single question was now bouncing around in Frank's head, circling and spinning in a chaotic, bloody dance.

What the hell had just happened?

Chapter 11 - Crafty

"The cave is just up ahead," Hoot shouted over his shoulder.

Frank could only grunt in reply. Even with his gory, makeshift cloak, it was hardly a comfortable trip through the knee-high snow. He had long ago transformed his legs, using his *Wolf Form's* thick fur as additional insulation. Even that benefit had been short-lived, and the hair was now frozen and matted against his skin.

Each gust and blow of frigid mountain air also carried snow and ice inside the cloak. The warm blood had long since frozen – the only blessing being that it effectively bound the mass of fur more tightly to Frank's skin and kept it from flapping around as much.

Frank saw Hoot stop in front of a mound of snow, a wooden stake buried in the ground nearby. Hoot felt at the area gingerly with his fingertips. After a few seconds, the young man grunted and pushed through the white powder with his shoulder, quickly disappearing. Frank followed closely behind, too tired and miserable to question what had just happened.

Only a moment later, Frank stumbled into a cave.

The cavern itself wasn't terribly large – maybe thirty feet across. There was also a tunnel in the far wall that implied that the underground complex continued, but Frank couldn't muster the energy to care about that right now.

He could see that the entrance to the cave had been blocked off by a heavy leather sheet, which was what had likely allowed the snow to build up – but kept the wind and ice from penetrating into the cave. Even as Frank stumbled inside, the flap shifted back into position, and he could hear the wind howling on the other side – as though it was bemoaning the loss of its prey.

What captured Frank's attention firmly was the campfire burning on the other side of the room. Without caring about appearances, he hobbled over to the fire and promptly collapsed, sitting only inches away from the flames and trying vainly to warm his nearly frozen fingers.

"Well, you look like shit," Howl remarked, disgust tinging his voice. Runner edged away from Frank, looking at the bloody trail of water and snow that he had left in his wake. Spider simply stared at Frank dispassionately, the man's face an impenetrable mask.

"He's still in better shape than most of the new recruits," Hoot commented, dropping down beside the fire and holding out his hands to the flames. "You remember Horns? We had to drag him into the

cave, and he was nearly frozen solid."

"Speaking of which, where exactly did he find the Burrower fur?" Silver demanded, eyeing Hoot accusingly. She had stripped some of her armor, laying the pieces out to dry on the other side of the cave and revealing the patches of fur that lined her bare arms and shoulders.

Is she talking about the mastodon creature? Frank thought, struggling to follow the conversation while warming himself. In his frenzy, he hadn't had a chance to inspect the beast.

The young man shrugged. "He stumbled into it. Blind luck if you ask me. Although, I have to admit, it is sort of impressive that he managed to walk into the cave by himself…" Hoot trailed off, looking at Silver meaningfully.

Silver grimaced, clearly not buying the excuse. "Uh huh." She shifted her penetrating blue eyes back to Frank. "He survived, I guess." Despite her harsh words, there was a grudging respect in her voice.

"So, what the hell is this? S-some sort of test or rite of passage?" Frank demanded, still shivering and stuttering slightly. "Send the n-noob out into the snow to freeze to death?"

Howl snorted in amusement. "Everything is a test. We only grow powerful by facing things that are stronger than us. You are a Shifter – or at least you are trying to be. You better get used to it, or you won't last long."

"Besides, we haven't even made it to the Chasm yet," Runner commented. The gruff man eyed Frank appraisingly. "Your troubles are just about to begin."

"Now, now. You lot are going to scare him!" Hoot retorted as he shed his wet furs. "Besides, you should be thankful. Our new recruit's little stroke of luck will feed us tonight." With that statement, Hoot pulled the cloth-covered steaks from his pack and handed them to Runner.

"He should be scared. A little fear is a good thing. Keeps you on your toes," Runner said. The man unwrapped the snow-packed steaks and inspected the meat carefully. He gave a curt nod before pulling an assortment of vials and equipment from his bag. Runner placed a stand on either side of the campfire and then balanced a stew pot between them. "You know as well as I do how many we lose to the Chasm each year. This is a last resort."

"Last resort?" Frank asked. He was beginning to feel a little less like a human popsicle the longer he sat by the flames. However, he soon discovered he had a new problem – shedding the bloody fur was harder than it looked. He was trying to peel the animal's skin from his body, using the fire to melt through the ice that bound it to his skin.

When he'd first tried to remove the pelt, it felt sort of like ripping off one gigantic, gory band-aid.

Hoot nudged Silver, and she let out a soft huff. "Some of our members have trouble reaching *Communion*. As I'm sure Abigail told you, not everyone can connect with everything. This is why we have different specializations: Tamers, Shifters, and Growers," she explained, pointing at the various individuals around the fire as she spoke.

"But even within a specific group – Tamers, let's say – they can't necessarily bond with every creature. It's the same with Growers and various types of plants. We have our own preferences and personalities, after all."

Silver ran a hand through her hair, her fingers hesitating as they touched her furry ears. "For Shifters, this can be a bit more *challenging*. Many of us tend to gravitate toward predators." She hesitated, her eyes distant. "But that often requires a certain state of mind. Predators are all about the hunt, the kill. *Survival*."

Her sapphire eyes met Frank's, and he had difficulty looking away. "It takes a particular mindset to commune with these creatures. Humans aren't naturally predisposed to this state of mind. This is even worse as we grow older and become less open to the world and to other creatures. We build up emotional baggage that makes letting go rather difficult."

"You mean we become soft and complacent," Runner grunted.

Silver gave a nod. "That's one way of looking at it. Regardless, we have to find ways to strip away or overcome those mental obstacles.

"We place ourselves in the face of danger. We find something more powerful to fight. A situation to overcome. We push ourselves to our limit and then past it. As Howl said, for a Shifter, *everything* is a test," Silver said forcefully, the hair on her arms rising slightly as she stared Frank down.

Frank's eyes widened in surprise. This was the first time that Silver had actually been helpful – some of her anger and resentment washing away. Apparently, almost freezing to death must have improved her opinion of him. But her explanation was also a bit… disconcerting? This wasn't improved by the somber expressions that lingered on the others' faces. Or the memory of his encounter with the Burrower and the way that blind, almost primal, rage had overcome him. All he had been focused on was survival.

It also raised another question.

If the hike through a frozen wasteland was supposed to be the easy part, then what the hell lived in the Chasm?

Frank never got a clear answer. He finally managed to tug the

sheet of fur free from his body, letting the makeshift cloak fall to the floor. His skin was coated in chunks of half-melted crimson ice, which only partially obscured the cuts and scrapes that marred his chest and arms. His cloth shirt was little more than rags now. At some point during the fight with the Burrower, he must have destroyed it.

"Ugh, go wash off. You'll spoil the food," Runner said, pointing at the door to the cave. It was less a request than an order.

Frank grimaced. He had no desire to leave the warm embrace of the fire, but he had to agree that he was a mess.

It took him a few minutes to exit the cave and use the frigid snow outside to scrub his face and body clean of blood. Once he was finished, he stood outside the cave, shivering as the ice and snow beat against his bare flesh. He looked down at himself.

His chest was bare, and he wore only loose trousers, the fabric wet and clinging to his legs. For the first time, he realized he was almost naked. He hesitated at the entrance to the cavern, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious. He didn't usually strip down in front of people; after some teasing, he had even begged off taking showers after PE.

To make matters worse, he knew that Silver was inside. For some reason, the thought of her seeing him like this made him feel even more embarrassed.

A gust of wind pushed at him, causing him to shiver from the cold. A notification had already popped up in his peripheral vision – informing him that he was once more slowly dying. He let out a frustrated sigh, his breath misting.

Don't be a coward, he thought to himself.

Then Frank pushed his way through the loose bank of snow and back into the cave. As soon as he stepped inside, he was met with the delectable smell of food cooking, making him momentarily forget his self-consciousness. Even though his sense of smell was muted, it was enough to make his mouth water.

The group looked up as he entered, and Hoot let out a low whistle at his nearly naked form. "Looking good there, *big* boy," he said with a grin.

If Frank hadn't been so damn cold, he expected he would have blushed. Which was only made worse when Silver's glowing blue eyes skimmed over his body, lingering on his chest. He didn't see the shock or disgust he expected. Instead, he saw something different in her eyes that he couldn't quite place. She looked away quickly when she noticed him staring.

"Shut up," Frank muttered at Hoot and took a seat by the fire.

The young man cocked his head as he observed Frank, not unlike Archie. "Hey, I don't mean anything bad by it," he said,

handing a bowl to Frank.

Howl raised an eyebrow. “Actually, you should be proud,” he grudgingly added, gesturing at Frank’s body.

“Proud?” Frank asked, incredulously. That wasn’t the word he generally associated with himself – or his appearance. Hell, his parents had been trying to get him to lose weight for years.

Runner stepped in as Howl lurched forward to grab a bowl of stew. “A Shifter’s default mass has a lot of advantages. Generally speaking, larger people tend to be able to assume larger forms.”

“Let’s just say this is another important area where size matters,” Hoot interjected, nudging Frank with his elbow and giving him a knowing grin. This earned him a few chuckles from the group and an eye-roll from Silver.

Were they messing with him? It didn’t seem like it. They appeared to be serious. Frank shrugged his shoulders, suddenly feeling a bit less self-conscious. Well, at least he had found a place where his body was appreciated – even if it felt super weird after years of hearing the opposite.

Either way, he would still feel better with some clothes on. As Frank’s eyes skimmed the floor nearby, he suddenly noticed that the pile of fur was missing. He glanced around frantically and soon discovered that Spider held the fur in his hands, inspecting the material closely.

Frank was about to ask him what he was doing when Hoot interrupted him. “You better eat before it gets cold,” he said, gesturing at the bowl in Frank’s hands.

Frank happily obliged but kept his eyes on Spider. He had no intention of losing his makeshift cloak. Not if he was supposed to journey to some sort of death chasm through another torrent of ice and snow.

However, as he took his first bite, he was distracted by the notification that appeared in the air before him.

System Notice

You have ingested Burrower Soup and have obtained the following buffs:

+20 Cold Resistance
+50 Endurance

These buffs will last for twenty-four hours or until you die – whichever happens first.

Our money is on death!

Frank's eyes widened in surprise. Those were useful buffs. Although, he could have lived without the snarky prediction of his death. He had never really given much thought to cooking or food buffs in-game – but he supposed that was a silly oversight. Cooking tended to be a pretty standard trade skill in most games.

Hoot seemed to be reading his mind. "This is what I meant when I said we shouldn't let the carcass go to waste. Many of the creatures you slay provide buffs if they are cooked properly. In order to survive, creatures acclimate to their surroundings, so the enhancements tend to be narrowly tailored to that environment as well."

"Let me summarize. Lesson 1: When you enter a new place, be sure to kill and cook the wildlife. You'll probably live longer as a result," Howl said gruffly between spoonfuls of soup.

"I don't know why you lot are bothering to teach him if he hasn't even learned *Communion* yet," Silver grumbled.

"Not sure I see the harm," Howl answered with a shrug.

Frank looked at Howl in surprise. His impression was that the man saw him as a liability. He was thankful that someone besides Hoot had come to his aid.

"He'll probably be dead soon," Howl continued, "but if we increase his chances of survival, it will make for a much more interesting show."

Frank immediately deflated. Howl's sadistic reasons for helping him aside, he wasn't going to ignore the lesson. He immediately resolved to watch the group more carefully when they made camp. He also made a mental note to practice cooking and buy some equipment when – or if – he managed to return to the Twilight Throne. If what they were saying was true, this could be an incredibly useful skill.

As he finished the soup, Frank felt a faint draft of air on his back and whirled to find Spider standing behind him, holding the fur up to Frank's back and eyeing it appraisingly.

"Don't mind him," Hoot said. "Spider is our resident tailor and leatherworker. He's trying to get a sense of your measurements."

"Uh, okay," Frank said cautiously.

Howl sighed. "Lesson 2: Harvest skins and materials from your kills and use them to build new armor for yourself. Again, the creature will almost always have adapted to its native environment."

Silver grimaced but spoke up, "What he means is that you can

gain the bonuses while *shifted*."

"What? I don't understand," Frank said in confusion. "Don't I normally get my armor and weapon bonuses while *shifting*?"

"Not exactly," Howl grunted. "Your problem is that you can only shift certain body parts, so you probably haven't noticed that you lose the benefits of your weapons and armor. For example, if you only shift your legs, you can wield a weapon and get its bonuses. But anything that doesn't come from a living creature won't apply during a full-body shift."

Howl gestured at the group. "It's why you will never see a real Shifter wearing metal armor. We sometimes carry weapons just in case, but these don't help during a *shift*."

"So, you make your own armor from the creatures you kill?" Frank asked.

"Basically," Silver said, spooning some soup into her mouth. "And as Howl said, we can kill native creatures and craft armor on the fly. This then enhances our natural shapeshifting abilities and allows us to better adapt to that environment."

Frank was now intrigued. That meant both *Cooking* and *Tailoring* would be vital skills for his class if he ever learned how to *shift* properly. With this revelation, he turned to watch what Spider was doing – placing his now-empty bowl aside.

Spider's hands were a blur as he pulled pins from his pack – measuring and tacking the fur with military precision. He then pulled out a small red crystal and held it over the furs. The gem glowed crimson, and the skin appeared to cure almost immediately, hardening and thickening before Frank's eyes. Spider surveyed the result and seemed satisfied.

The mute Grower rummaged in his pack again and pulled out what appeared to be a small bonsai tree, except the plant's leaves were replaced with delicate streamers of silk. Spider leaned down over the plant, whispering to it almost silently. The small tree shuddered, and then a streamer of silken thread slowly grew from one limb, pooling in a coil along the ground.

Once the pile grew large enough, Spider picked up the silk, snipped off the end and set to work cutting and binding the leather. Within only moments, a pattern began to emerge in the fur, outlining the shape of a tunic.

"Can you move slower?" Frank asked. "Please? I'd like to learn."

Spider looked at him in surprise, but his movements slowed, and he began to silently show Frank how he was measuring each part of the fur and how to stitch the tough material together. Frank quickly lost track of time as he became more enmeshed in the project. He

vaguely heard the group laughing and grumbling to each other behind him, but his attention was focused solely on the leather and Spider's gestured instructions.

At some point, Spider began handing Frank tools, and he started contributing to the process. He helped Spider cut the tough skin and then stitch it together along carefully measured seams. The process was intriguing. Some part of Frank responded instinctively to the act of crafting, and he lost himself in the flow of the work – his focus narrowing to the slowly emerging garment in front of him.

When Frank looked up again, the fire had waned, and most of the group had taken up spots on the floor, using their packs as makeshift pillows. He wasn't certain how much time had passed and felt a momentary pang of confusion. The process had felt so natural. His fingers twitched – hungry for a new project.

One thing was clear to him. He enjoyed working with the leather more than he had expected. He briefly wondered if this was how Eliza felt working her garden.

Frank's attention shifted to the garments that he and Spider had created. There was now a rough set of trousers, a tunic, a pair of rough-shod boots, and a much more practical cloak splayed out across the floor. The construction was rugged but practical. He felt a faint glow of pride. Spider had done most of the work, but he had also helped create this. It was an interesting and exciting sensation. For most of his life, his brother and sister had been the creative ones. Even his father made his living creating new types of materials. Yet Frank had always assumed that the "creative gene" had skipped over him.

That was, until right now. The sense of accomplishment was incredible, and, for the first time, he could finally understand their passion.

Frank looked back at Spider. "Thank you," Frank said quietly, bowing his head.

He saw the glimmer of something that resembled respect in Spider's eyes. Yet the man said nothing. He turned and grabbed a parcel from his pack and handed it to Frank, almost reverently. Frank soon discovered that it was a set of simple tailoring tools – threads, crude scissors, and knives filled the leather pouch. Frank looked back up at Spider and simply nodded back, not knowing how to convey his appreciation.

As Spider stepped away and began to prepare an area to sleep, a notification appeared in Frank's vision.

> **New Skill: Tailoring**
> You have learned the art of creating clothing and armor from natural components. Masters of this craft have learned to create

true works of art such as armor that can deflect powerful attacks and withstand the fury of a volcano. These men and women are more than simple crafters, they become crafting gods – their services sought after by both kings and commoners alike.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect 1: 5% enhanced durability.

Well, that's cool, Frank thought to himself. For the first time in a long time, he felt like he was advancing. It had been some time since he had learned something new in-game.

Curious, he also picked up the armor and inspected it.

Burrower Armor (4-Piece Set)
This armor was crafted by an experienced tailor with the help of an apprentice. While the design is crude, the product is practical and durable. When the cloak, pants, and tunic are brought together, the fur also seems to radiate a faint aura, staving off the cold more effectively.
Quality: C
Durability: 42/50
+45 Endurance
+30 Cold Resistance (Set Bonus)

Frank's eyes widened in surprise as he held the armor in his hands. Even low-quality pieces of armor could provide set bonuses? Between this makeshift armor and the soup, he would be sitting at 50 cold resistance. He could start to understand now what Howl and Silver had been trying to say.

For example, if they entered a desert, could he slay a few creatures and then craft himself new armor and cook some food to gain fire resistance? If this applied in other environments, this combination could be incredibly powerful.

He immediately resolved to practice and refine these skills as much as possible. He might not yet be able to master his shifting abilities, but this was the sort of thing that could give him an edge. He could even put his cooking skills to use to help the other members of <Original Sin>. Combined with Eliza's potions, they could probably stack a large number of buffs going into each fight.

Besides, putting the pragmatic advantages aside, the act of creating the armor had resonated with something deep inside himself.

Frank wasn't even sure what to call it – that sense of being *present* as he helped Spider craft the armor. The way he had lost track of time and immersed himself in the flow of the work was something he'd never experienced before.

All he knew was that he wanted to experience it again.

Frank glanced at the other members of the group where they were sprawled out across the ground. He would need to wait for them to wake before they could continue their journey. In the meantime, he could work. Frank pulled up his in-game console and went online. It was time to start learning more about AO's crafting systems.

* * *

Unbeknownst to Frank, a pair of sapphire eyes had watched him as he worked with Spider. They had observed his careful movements and the way his fingers moved almost reverently across the fur.

Silver had to admit to a certain level of grudging respect. Frank was clearly a natural when it came to *Tailoring*. He had also earned Spider's approval – which was no small feat. She doubted that Frank understood the weight of the gift that Spider had given him. She had personally seen the normally reserved man singlehandedly beat Howl to within an inch of his life when he had accidentally broken one of his tools.

She also knew that Hoot had helped Frank. She would have to have words with the gregarious, wide-eyed member of their party when they were alone. The purpose of this test wasn't to coddle their trainee. This entire process was supposed to be grueling – to break down a person's sense of *self*. Hoot knew that.

Although Frank would likely have made it to the cave anyway. She had to admit that he had fared much better than many of their other recruits.

It didn't help that the others were also opening up to him. There was something about Frank that made it easy to want to help him. Like his soul was crying out for acceptance. Despite their fears and suspicions, it was hard for them to turn him away.

However, there was also another side to him.

Silver had seen the way that Frank had killed the Burrower. She had been watching in the distance, sitting in her *Wolf Form* to stave off the cold and blend into the snow. She had seen the way that an almost primal nature had overtaken the burly young man. He had ripped into the creature in a frenzy of blood and claws that brought back

memories of death, destruction, and fire. She had only seen that sort of primal fury once before. Even now, she shuddered and had to force the memories away, her fists clenching almost painfully.

Silver couldn't shake the feeling that Frank represented a danger to their community. If she were being honest with herself, she knew that he wasn't a cultist. But there was something else about him that she couldn't shake – some sense of *chaos*. She had learned to trust those instincts over the years.

She rolled over, trying vainly to find a comfortable position on the hard, stone floor and wishing she could shift forms to sleep. This human form was so weak and fragile and cold, but she resisted the urge. She had already spent too much time as a wolf today.

Besides, she knew it had nothing to do with the cavern.

Silver felt guilty – compassion warring with instinct. It was a well-worn emotion that she didn't enjoy and she mentally recoiled from it.

None of this mattered anyway. They would reach the Chasm tomorrow.

And she expected that they would soon be returning to Haven with one less member.

Chapter 12 - Crystalline

As the others began to stir, Frank swiped away his screens. He rubbed at his eyes before glancing at the in-game clock. While the others slept, he had logged out briefly to go to the bathroom and grab some food, but he had spent the rest of his time online searching through forums and looking for anything he could find on the game's crafting systems.

His online research had at least been fruitful. He had learned quite a bit about *Tailoring* while they slept. He was going to have to visit Cecil when he returned to the Twilight Throne. He suspected that the gruff little man could help him find some new patterns for future tailoring projects. In the meantime, Frank had taken the liberty of downloading a huge number of designs from the web – a mixture of things other players had learned in-game and real-world designs.

It was honestly amazing how much AO was able to imitate the real world.

He heard a faint groan and looked over to find Silver pawing at her eyes and stretching, her ears twitching slightly. Her hair was slightly askew, and she blinked sleepily. She stretched, arching her back and her tail going rigid for a moment.

Frank was forced to do a double take as he watched her. It was remarkable how… well… how *pretty* she looked like this. She spent most of her time glaring at him or coming up with sadistic plans to get him killed. Yet, right now, she looked almost peaceful.

As though his thoughts had alerted her, Silver abruptly glanced in his direction. The icy glare was back in full force, and Frank looked away. There was no point in antagonizing her. Especially not if the group was going to force him to explore some sort of death canyon today.

Once everyone was awake, the group had packed up their equipment and hoisted their packs. Frank ran his fingers across his new furs. He would finally get a chance to test his armor against the elements. Even inside the cave, he was already warmer. They also fit much better than the ragged cloak, and he expected that they would provide a better seal against the wet and cold.

"Ahh, someone's finally looking like an official member of the pack," Hoot said, smacking Frank on the back roughly. For such a slender man, the blow was surprisingly strong. Archie gave a faint hoot from nearby, and the Tamer immediately reached into his bag to grab a few extra scraps of Burrower meat, tossing them to her.

"He's not a member," Howl grunted roughly.

"Maybe after he makes it through the Chasm," Runner added, hefting his pack. He glanced at Silver. "What do you think his chances are?"

The young woman looked at Frank briefly, her gaze appraising. He thought for a fraction of a second, he detected doubt there – or maybe hesitation. But it vanished so quickly that he assumed he had imagined it. "Terrible. Now let's get moving. There's no point in wasting daylight."

With that, she pushed past the makeshift door, fresh white snow tumbling into the cave as she tugged the leather sheet aside. Frank could already feel a stiff, icy wind penetrate the cavern. It seemed that the weather hadn't improved overnight.

I'm really not going to miss this icy wasteland.

Frank watched the group as they funneled out of the cave one-by-one. He could feel a hollow weight settling in his stomach. He had no idea what to expect of the Chasm, but it certainly hadn't been an easy trip so far. He doubted this next part was going to involve a calm stroll through a sunny, grass-covered field.

He just hoped he was up to the challenge.

* * *

It took the group nearly two hours to reach their destination. An almost perpetual snowstorm seemed to be beating against the mountains – wind, ice, and snow pushing back at the travelers continuously. It was challenging to find solid footing in the loose powder, and the visibility was terrible, making the journey both difficult and dangerous. It was abundantly clear to Frank why they encountered no native creatures or players up here. Only a crazy person would brave this weather.

When they did finally arrive – half-frozen and irritable – Frank had to admit that their destination wasn't much to look at.

"It's a hole in the ground," Frank observed.

"But an evil, deadly hole!" Hoot amended.

Frank wasn't sure if he could see the evil or deadly part about it. The Chasm was a jagged pit carved into the ground. It was about ten feet across, and Frank could see blue ice lining the walls of the hole as they slid down into darkness.

As Frank surveyed their surroundings, there didn't seem to be anything special about this particular location. They were standing on a roughly flat plateau nestled between two mountains. The only

oddity about the hole in front of them was that the snow piled up on either side didn't seem to obscure the opening, despite the wind that continued to howl around them. Although, he didn't really want to guess at why that was the case. None of the possible answers were confidence inspiring.

"Uh, so what now?" Frank asked.

Silver pulled a coil of rope from her pack, swiftly attaching a metal hook to one end. With a vicious sweep of her arm, she embedded the steel into the ridge along the side of the hole and tugged on the rope experimentally. When it held, she grunted in satisfaction.

"You are going down," she said tersely, barely looking at Frank. "Alone."

"Huh?" Frank replied – showing off his *keen* intellect.

Although, to his credit, the other members of the group looked equally surprised.

"Wait, alone?" Hoot said. "Even the normal recruits usually go down with a more experienced member of the pack."

Frowns were also painted on the faces of both Howl and Runner. There might be no love lost there, but they didn't seem happy about Frank venturing off on his own.

"What?" Silver demanded, staring down the other members of the pack. "Frank's the one that insisted on this, remember. Plus, he's not a member of our pack. I'm sure he can handle this by himself." Sarcasm laced her voice, but Frank also noticed that she seemed surprised that the other members of the hunting pack were challenging her.

"He doesn't know the caverns," Hoot retorted. "He could simply get lost. The point of this was supposed to be *training*. Not to leave him stranded in a hole in the ground. Alderas' instructions were quite clear."

"I'm aware of the Elder Shifter's orders. Besides, he has a map," Silver pointed out.

"Unreasonable," someone whispered.

All eyes turned to Spider. This was the first time that Frank had heard the man speak. While he hadn't exactly elaborated on his opinion, that single word and the way he was staring at Silver made his point crystal-clear.

The young woman looked around at the rest of the group, seeing the same expression mirrored on their faces. No one thought this was a good idea.

Silver let out a sigh. "Fine. Someone can go with him. Volunteers?"

No hands went up. They all looked at each other sheepishly,

and Hoot even edged away from the hole slightly.

"Wait, so you lot don't want him to go alone, but you don't want to be the one to go with him? Bunch of hypocrites," Silver muttered, crossing her arms.

"Well, technically only *one* of us was instructed to teach him," Hoot began slowly. Archie even pointed a wing at Silver as though to emphasize the point. "Besides, this was your bright idea. It isn't time for the sacrifice, and you know how… *it* can be between meals."

"What's *it*?" Frank asked in confusion. "What's down there?"

"You don't need to worry," Howl reassured him. "The Beast only comes out during the sacrifices… I mean, usually."

"Okay, what sacrifices?" Frank asked in exasperation.

"Uh… Well, we had a problem with…" Runner began, but Silver smacked him in the back of the head before he could finish. The man looked like he was about to get upset, but it only took a glare and a low-pitch growl from Silver to quiet him.

"That's none of his business, and you know it," Silver snapped.

"Yeah, so none of this is making me feel any better…" Frank began.

"Fine! If you all are going to sit here with your tails between your legs, I'll do it myself," Silver said – clearly deciding to end the discussion before it went any further.

"Oh no, you don't have to," Hoot said weakly, clearly trying to mess with her. "But I guess if you insist…"

This earned him another stern glare from Silver. "Why don't you all make yourselves useful while we're down there. Scout the area and make sure nothing has encroached on our territory. We'll be a day or two at most."

With that, Silver grabbed hold of the rope firmly and simply leaped into the hole.

"Uh…" Frank murmured, glancing over the ledge. He could feel the world tilt and sway around him as he peered down into the hole. Using his wings had helped him start to overcome his fear of heights, but the chasm was too narrow to summon his wings now. If he lost his grip, it was going to be a long fall.

Silver must have hit the bottom of the hole because the rope was given two sharp tugs. Howl pulled up some slack and handed the rope to Frank – who accepted it reluctantly.

"It'll be fine," Hoot said, noticing Frank's expression. "Maybe," he added quietly.

"Enough talking. You have a firm grip on the rope?" Howl asked Frank.

He gave a curt nod in response.

"Good. See you in a few days," Howl said with a menacing grin.

Then he simply pushed Frank over the edge.

Frank tumbled backward, feeling his stomach lurch as his feet found nothing but air and he began to plummet down into the hole. As he dropped into the icy darkness, he heard someone shout down at him, their voice echoing off the walls and repeating in an endless cascade.

"Try not to die!"

* * *

Frank survived the fall. As his slack ran out, he was jerked to a sudden stop, his arm straining against the coarse material of the rope. He then managed to execute something that looked like a slow tumble to the bottom of the cavern. He was just happy when he didn't land on his ass at the bottom.

"Was there a reason we had to do this the fast way?" he muttered as his feet finally landed on firm ground once again. He resisted the urge to drop to his knees and kiss the ground. That probably wouldn't look good in front of Silver. Instead, he glanced back up the hole. He could only see a faint pinprick of light far above him.

"It's faster," Silver answered tersely.

Frank looked over to find her standing impatiently beside him. His *Night Vision* had kicked in automatically, allowing him to see inside the dark cavern – although he couldn't make out much detail. Even with his improved eyesight, there was very little light.

It seemed that Silver also had no trouble making her way around since she was able to grab the rope from his hand and fasten it securely to another metal hook she had embedded in the floor. He caught her eyes flashing a familiar, glowing sapphire. Perhaps some sort of shifting ability explained her enhanced eyesight? He couldn't be sure.

"Let's go," she said, gesturing at a tunnel adjacent to the cave.

The pair walked in near silence for a few minutes through a winding series of tunnels. Each time Frank tried to ask a question about what they were doing or where they were going, he was met with a shushing sound from Silver.

A moment later, Silver disappeared around a corner, and Frank followed her without hesitation. As he rounded the turn, he was momentarily blinded – putting up a hand to block the sudden light.

The tunnel had terminated in a massive room that was roughly fifty feet across. The walls and ceiling were made up of thick blue ice,

with huge frozen cylinders crisscrossing the air in a chaotic pattern. Large holes had been carved in the ceiling, letting in beams of light that refracted along the mirror-like ice, sending out a spray of mottled blue that illuminated the entire room. Faint powdery snow drifted down into the room from the holes in the ceiling. The light dusting was at least more tolerable than the blizzard Frank knew was raging above ground.

The strange part was that this underground canyon stretched on into the distance – seemingly without end. It was like someone had carved a gorge through the mountains and then slapped some snow and ice on top. Yet the mystery of the canyon's existence wasn't enough to distract from the kaleidoscope of blue that shone through the room.

"Wow," Frank whispered. "It's beautiful."

Even Silver's typically serious expression cracked for a moment, and she nodded in agreement. "It is indeed." Her ears quirked slightly as she took in the sight, her tail swishing gently behind her though she didn't seem to realize it.

Then she shook off her momentary admiration, regaining her no-nonsense demeanor. She looked back at Frank. "We need to be careful from this point forward. No noise if you can help it, and don't touch anything but the floor. We don't want to wake up the creatures that live down here."

"What lives down here?" Frank asked quietly. "Is it that *thing* you guys were talking about?"

"No… and we shouldn't run into it – at least, not if we're careful. The Beast lives much deeper within the Chasm. But he's also not the only creature that resides down here. This is a breeding ground for cave leeches."

"What's a cave le—?"

Frank was cut off by another shushing sound. "Just keep your mouth shut. I know it's going to be hard for you, but please don't do anything stupid. I can't keep you alive if things go south," Silver said. Before Frank had a chance to reply, she stepped into the room and began winding through the series of frozen columns.

Frank stared after her, grumbling under his breath. Was there any point to being deliberately obtuse, or did Silver just enjoy messing with him? And what the hell was that crack about carrying him if things went south? He could certainly fight well enough on his own. He had killed a dragon, hadn't he?

A timid voice in the back of his mind spoke up, reminding him that technically Jason and Riley had weakened the dragon first. He had been hopped up on potions, and it *had* looked like a unicorn at the time.

But the point still stood. He had killed a dragon!

He could feel his anger continue to simmer as he walked after Silver, glaring at her back. What the hell was her problem anyway? It wasn't like he had done anything to her, and, at this point, she had to know he wasn't affiliated with the cultists. Yet she still seemed to have some sort of personal grudge against him. Plus, it was just stupid not to tell him what might live in the cave or why he was supposed to be quiet.

Actually, on second thought, this was all really, really stupid.

Frank suddenly grabbed at Silver's arm and twisted her around. "Hold on a second," he whispered. "You have to tell me what's down here. This is dumb."

"You need to shut up," she hissed, her eyes flashing.

"Okay, but *why*?" Frank demanded. "What the hell is the point of not telling me anything about the creatures that live down here? Are you just *trying* to get me killed?"

Silver paused for a moment, and he thought he saw hesitation fill her eyes before it was replaced with anger. She wrenched her arm free. "Why the hell should I tell *you* anything?"

"Because I'm down in this damn hole in the ground with you. It's just you and me if we get attacked," Frank replied, trying to keep his voice calm.

This earned him a derisive snort. "You think I need your help? So far, you have done little to impress me with your *prowess*."

Frank felt his anger flare, a glimmer of crimson light tinging the corners of his vision. He had to double check his UI to make sure his *Rage* ability hadn't activated, but he didn't see a notification. The sensation was strange, as though his anger was coming from somewhere else.

"It's not like you've given me a chance to prove myself," Frank retorted before he could stop himself.

"Oh, should I be coddling you then? Set up some test of your *strength* with nicely defined rules," Silver replied sarcastically.

Frank bit down an angry retort. If they were going to have this fight, then they should address the 500-pound wolf in the room. "What the hell do you have against me?" Frank demanded. "For the last time, I am *not* in league with the cultists. I haven't done anything to you or your town – and I don't plan to!"

"Which is exactly what the last visitor said," Silver shot back. The hair on her arms was standing up now as she glared at him.

That is the stupidest fucking… Frank thought to himself. The red glow was growing now, yet he couldn't understand where it was coming from. Some still-sane part of his mind weakly pointed out that his anger didn't really make sense. This wasn't the sort of fight he

would usually pick; hell, he usually tried to avoid conflict if he could.

"What the hell am I even going to do?" Frank spat back. "I'm one man, and you can turn into a massive freaking wolf. You have an entire town filled with powerful casters and Shifters. And what do I even stand to gain by hurting you? I need you all to help me learn my abilities."

"Which is also the same thing the last man said. That… *Master*," Silver spat, her eyes flashing and her voice rising. "And he killed my mother…"

Silver froze, her eyes widening as though surprised she had said that aloud. A strange mixture of emotions flitted across her face, and she seemed to be at war with herself, balling her hands into fists.

"Oh… oh shit," Frank muttered.

The pieces were beginning to click together. The horrified look on Sophie's face when her older sister had mentioned the cultists. Silver's intense hatred of him. Her father's goal to try to make her put aside her bias. The sad look on Alderas' face as he had watched Silver storm out of the meeting lodge.

Normally, this revelation would have dampened Frank's anger, and he would have backed down – perhaps tried to comfort Silver or apologize. Yet the red glow only flared brighter in his peripheral vision. That same weak voice in the back of his mind tried to warn him that something strange was going on here, but he was having difficulty focusing on that right now.

Silver let out a low growl, shaking her head. Then her sapphire eyes centered back on Frank, glaring at him. He saw pain there and an unspoken accusation. "I just want you to go away. You are a risk and an unnecessary one. You could endanger our entire town. And for what? My father's stupid ideals?

"We shouldn't even be down here. We are putting members of the hunting pack at risk for what? For some *stranger*?"

"This was your idea! You are the one that brought us here, and you're the one who refuses to tell me anything – putting us both at risk!" Frank retorted. Immediately, his anger flared, matching the intensity of Silver's. He felt like he was losing control, just like what had happened with the Burrower.

Silver let out a growl in response. "Perhaps that was a mistake. According to my *father*, we're supposed to be open to people and to the world. Yet that was the same idiotic mindset that let the Master walk straight into Haven, learn our abilities, and kill our people."

She took a menacing step forward, her teeth bared and her skin beginning to shimmer with multi-colored energy. "Perhaps I should have ended your life in the snow – when Hoot conveniently told you where that Burrower was located. No one would have been the wiser,

and we could have been rid of you once and for all."

Frank didn't shrink from her challenge, staring her down and his own unnatural anger refusing to let him back down. Suddenly, it felt like something clicked into place in his mind. The crimson glow expanded until it was as though a red lens had been dropped over his vision. With this abrupt change came fleeting images, their edges blurry and poorly defined. It was disorienting, as though he was viewing scenes from someone else's perspective.

Frank was suddenly kneeling on the ground, a rugged man robed in thick furs standing over him. The man – a Shifter, he somehow knew – smeared blood across his cheeks. He gave him a name. A new name. He had forsaken his birth name and the guilt that came with it. He was Silver now, a member of the hunting pack. His sister and father stood nearby. He could sense their fear, their concern, their reticence. But he shut it out – turning away from them and joining the pack.

The image shifted. He was crouched in the darkness now, his body elongated, and his senses heightened. The world had taken on a richer and more abundant variety of smells, each whiff of air telling a story. He looked down and found himself staring at a woman – a traveler. She had trespassed on the pack's domain, and anger curdled in his veins. His thoughts flashed back to his mother. There was only one solution to prevent that from happening again. His fangs snapped forward, and the coppery taste of blood filled his mouth.

Then Frank was standing at the bank of the lake beside the Ancestor Tree, the sun cresting the ridge of the mountains. He stared down at the waters, and Silver's face stared back – blue eyes framed by snow-white hair. His fingers traced the furry ears that sprouted from his head and tears bloomed in the corners of his eyes. A whirlwind of pain, guilt, and anger spiraled in his chest.

Then a lone, painful question crept through his mind.

What had he sacrificed for the sake of revenge? For the sake of guilt and fear?

As quickly as the images and emotions had overcome him, Frank suddenly found himself back in the icy cavern. He blinked hard, trying to clear the last vestiges of the foreign memories that drifted through his mind. Anger curdled in his veins, and his vision still glowed a brilliant crimson – but he didn't feel like those emotions came from him.

He looked up and saw Silver standing there, growling and rage flashing in her eyes.

"I should just end this now," she spat at him, her body already beginning to shift as thick hair sprouted along her arms. "You are a danger to our people."

Frank tried to suppress the unnatural anger flooding his body…

but it was too powerful – as though it had gathered momentum and now careened out of control.

"Then fucking do it," Frank shot back before he realized what he was saying. "But at least be *honest*. You aren't going to kill me because I'm a danger. You are doing it because you are *afraid*."

Silver's eyes widened in surprise, and Frank pressed the advantage, taking a step forward and glaring at her.

"Killing me won't change what happened. It won't bring your mother back. It won't change the fact that you blame yourself. It won't change how you pushed away your father and your sister. Or how you gave up your own name.

"It won't make the guilt go away," Frank growled.

"How… what?" Silver asked, suddenly looking uncertain, her sapphire eyes wide.

Then she seemed to recover, her anger pushing back at her own doubt and hesitation. "How could you possibly know any of that?" she demanded, her voice rising and echoing across the cavern. "Are you really in league with the cultists?"

Frank snorted in disbelief. "Because you are such a mystery? The injured girl playing soldier? Pushing everyone away because poor-pitiful-little-you can't handle what happened to your family? You think you are the only person who has ever known pain or hardship?" Frank snapped, his voice rising to match hers. His words were cruel – far more hurtful than he had intended. But the strange alien anger made it difficult to think straight.

"Fuck you," Silver shouted at him.

She lunged, but Frank saw the attack coming. He could vaguely sense the moment when her anger had turned to killing intent – as though she had crossed some ephemeral line that only he could see.

So, he was ready for her.

Frank dove to the side and Silver raced past him, heading straight for one of the frozen columns that crisscrossed the canyon. She tried to stop her headlong charge, but it was too late. She crashed into the ice, and it splintered under the force of the blow. At the same time, a single bell-like chime echoed through the air. It almost sounded like she had struck a windchime with a hammer.

The pair suddenly froze in place. Silver's eyes widened in horror as she realized what she had done – her rage momentarily forgotten. Her gaze shifted farther down the canyon, her ears twitching as though she strained to catch a telltale sound.

Frank didn't get a chance to ask her what she was searching for.

An answering chime echoed from deeper within the underground canyon, followed quickly by a series of shorter notes.

With alarming speed, the noise began to grow until the walls vibrated with the ringing. It was like a massive organ was playing in the underground chasm, the sound echoing and reverberating endlessly across the ice.

"What is that?" Frank shouted over the growing noise, assuming that being quiet was no longer necessary.

Silver looked back at him, only horror and fear reflected in her eyes now. "Cave leeches!" she shouted back.

"What the hell is a cave leech?"

He didn't have to wait long to find out.

Chapter 13 - Leeching

The creatures scurried along the walls and the columns of blue ice that filled, the room in a haphazard pattern. They were nearly three feet long with elongated crystalline bodies that were capped off with multiple sets of spindly legs. Where their head might have been, a pair of large pincers had been joined to their torso, the claws snapping at the air as they moved.

If Frank had to compare them to something in the real world, the creatures looked like what might have happened if someone had dramatically increased the size of a cockroach, made a mold, poured it full of water, froze it, and then used magic to animate the result.

Although, why anyone would ever do that was beyond him.

More puzzling was how the creatures could see. They didn't have a true head or anything that resembled eyes. Yet they sure made plenty of noise. Each time their legs touched the ice, a ring echoed through the underground canyon. Considering they each had multiple legs and dozens of the creatures already crawled along the walls, the sound was steadily growing.

Frank's gaze shifted to the cracked column of ice that Silver had struck, recalling the chime that had sounded through the canyon when she had touched it. Those same crystal columns crisscrossed the entire canyon, and he was just now realizing that they were too perfect – with no natural explanation for how they had been formed.

His eyes widened as his perspective suddenly shifted.

Unless they were more like a web and these beasts hunted by sound…

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, he thought to himself.

He shook his head. Either way, the ugly frozen sonar crickets were clearly a threat. Frank quickly inspected one, already fearing the worst.

Cave Leech – Level 123
Health – Unknown
Mana – Unknown
Equipment – Unknown
Resistances – Unknown

Oh, that doesn't seem so bad, he thought.

Each creature was relatively low level. However, he was forced to do a double take as he realized that the wave of creatures hadn't

stopped. More kept filtering into the cavern, scuttling out of the adjoining tunnels and the holes carved in the ceiling.

While the chimes had been only mildly irritating at first, they were growing oppressive. This was made even worse by the acoustics of the cavern, which caused the sound to echo off the smooth icy walls and reverberate almost endlessly.

"What the hell do we do?" Frank shouted at Silver, holding his hands up to his ears in a vain attempt to try to drown out the sound.

She gave him a look as though to say, "Now you want to listen to me, idiot?"

However, she let out a short sigh and then pointed farther down the underground canyon. "We need to run. Follow me," she yelled over the noise. Or, at least that's what Frank thought she said. At this point, he was forced to read her lips.

Either way, he didn't have time to second-guess his interpretation.

In a shimmer of multi-colored light, Silver transformed. The transition wasn't prolonged or exaggerated. One moment, the demi-human girl stood beside him – the next a massive silver wolf. Sparing one last look at Frank, Silver abruptly took off, bounding through the cave at a blazing pace.

His heart thudding in his chest, Frank transformed his legs, feeling the itch and flash of pain that signaled his *shift*. For good measure, he also shifted his arms, which caused the muscles to stretch and thicken and long claws to emerge from his fingernails. The stamina drain of sustaining both transformations was rough, but he didn't exactly have any other weapons.

He moved to follow Silver. Frank launched himself across the cavern floor, the ice splintering each time his feet struck the ground.

The pair raced through the underground canyon at a reckless pace. As they passed several leeches along the walls, the creatures seemed to be able to sense their location – turning to follow them and snapping with their claws. Another pair settled against the ice, their legs bending almost comically, before launching themselves airborne.

"Oh shit," Frank muttered, diving below one of the leeches. The creature streaked through the air above him, its claws snapping shut only inches away from his head.

He didn't have time to contemplate the near miss.

More leeches were already preparing to launch themselves from various positions around the room. He sprinted forward, ducking and weaving to avoid the snapping claws while he tried to keep sight of Silver's blurry white form – even as the overwhelming sound of bells echoed through the cavern like some discordant death march.

As Frank rounded another column, he was caught by surprise.

Massive ice claws snapped shut, but this time, he didn't have a chance to dodge out of the way. The pincers closed around his forearm, the thick hair from his *Bear Form* offering little protection. He expected the pincers to cut cleanly through his skin but was surprised when they barely nicked him – holding him firmly in place.

He was about to question this anticlimactic attack when he felt something like lava enter his skin. He let out a scream of pain, and notifications began to flash in his peripheral vision. Without thinking, his free hand came forward, and he tore desperately at the leech with his transformed fingers.

When his claws simply scraped off its slick, icy body, he resorted to a more direct tactic. He lifted his entrapped arm and smashed the leech against a nearby column repeatedly – his panic and pain lending him additional strength. The leech's body swiftly broke apart into shards of ice and the pain mercifully relented.

He finally managed to spare a quick glance at the notification.

System Notice

The Cave Leech has drained your mana, consuming 100 mana/second.

Once your mana has been entirely drained, the Cave Leech will begin draining health at a higher rate. Status debuffs may apply.

Maybe try not to get hit…

"No shit," Frank muttered, glancing at the prompt. He wasn't looking forward to experiencing that again. He didn't have much mana to begin with, and apparently a single leech could make it through his entire pool in a few short seconds.

His breath already coming in ragged gasps, Frank felt panic blooming in his chest. More of the creatures were beginning to surround him, and he had lost sight of Silver. He couldn't see her anywhere. He didn't want to die down here in this icy shithole. He glanced up. If he could get to some higher ground, he could probably find Silver again. But he didn't have room to use his wings with the way the columns of ice filled the underground canyon.

Still, that didn't mean he couldn't still get airborne.

Not giving himself a chance to chicken out, Frank knelt and then jumped straight up, the muscles in his legs burning from the

effort. He shot up into the air, causing the ice to crack and splinter beneath him from the force of his leap.

As he neared a frozen pillar, he dug his claws into the ice. He barely caught himself, his enhanced nails scratching across the slick surface before finally catching hold. As he hung suspended by a single arm, a leech scurried down the column toward him, its claws snapping. With his free hand, Frank roughly batted it aside – sending its body careening into a nearby wall where it broke apart in an explosion of frozen fragments.

Having bought himself a momentary reprieve, Frank managed to scramble up on top of the column, digging his claws into the ice to make sure he had a firm footing.

From his new perch, he could make out Silver's white form ahead. But between them was a horde of cave leeches that had begun to coat the walls and floor of the canyon – their crystalline bodies reflecting the light that trickled through the ceiling in a dazzling cascade of blue. The ground was a death trap and the only relatively safe spots were the columns, where the leeches couldn't clump up in such large numbers.

Frank suddenly knew what he had to do. And he hated it.

"This is such a stupid idea," he muttered.

Then he leaped.

His claws snatched at another column of ice, carving deep grooves into the surface. Instead of coming to a halt, his biceps bulged, and he shifted his weight in mid-air, using the combination to change his trajectory and launch himself forward again without pausing. He struck another column at a glancing angle – this time with his feet. He shoved off with his legs, causing the column to crack in half, the splinters radiating outward at an alarming rate as the pillar began to crumble, raining shards of ice along the floor.

As he kept up his newfound parkour skills, Frank could hear more columns falling behind him. It sounded like a bull had charged through a warehouse full of windchimes. The sound was almost deafening as the ice struck the ground, smashing many of the leeches apart and sending fragments of ice hurtling in all directions.

But Frank didn't have time to look back.

A cave leech launched itself from a nearby wall towards him. Frank couldn't afford to slow down, or he would miss his next leap. Instead, he smacked the creature in midair, before digging the claws of his free hand into another column. He hadn't missed the fact that his stamina was draining at an alarming rate, and he could feel his transformed muscles burn with the strain. He couldn't keep this up for much longer.

Frank stopped for just a moment on the next column, giving his

waning stamina a brief chance to recover. It also gave him the opportunity to survey the room.

He could see that he was catching up with Silver. Since she was forced to stay on the ground, her progress had been slowed by the horde of leeches that swarmed around her.

However, she was insanely fast, and her canine form seemed almost boneless. She practically *flowed* around the leeches like water, the occasional flash of claws or snap of her fangs neatly destroying any leech that got too close. It was fascinating to watch her grace – especially after Frank's haphazard leaps between the columns.

As Frank watched, he saw one of the irritating bugs barely manage to snatch at Silver's tail. She let out a howl of pain before whipping in a circle, causing the offending creature to crash against a nearby wall. The delay cost her, though. Silver was getting surrounded, her back against the wall, but even more of the creatures scurried down toward her. Apparently, there was a limit to even her speed and agility.

We need to get the hell out of this room, Frank thought, his pulse pounding in his ears.

His eyes skimmed the room, and he saw an adjoining tunnel near Silver's position. No leeches seemed to be crawling out of that hole. That would have to be their escape. He just needed to clear some room for Silver so that they could retreat.

The big question was how the hell he was going to get from his perch to Silver's position. Oh, and he might need to clear some space for the two of them to retreat.

Suddenly, another stupid, crazy idea occurred to Frank. It just seemed to click. He couldn't help but wonder if this was how Jason often felt – insane enlightenment striking him in the heat of battle. He immediately resolved to stop trying to second-guess his friend.

Sometimes, you just had to act.

So, Frank took his own advice. He just acted.

He let himself drop from his perch, his stomach lurching at his sudden weightlessness. Just before he fell away from the column entirely, he used his legs to assist gravity, shoving against the frozen cylinder and heading straight down. Just like the last time, the blow caused massive cracks to form in the ice behind him, the splinters radiating outward as the entire column began to tremble and shake.

Frank didn't have time to focus on that.

He was rocketing downward at a reckless pace, his surroundings blurring, and his eyes beginning to tear from the wind. The ground was approaching fast. Really fast.

However, this time, he didn't try to slow or stop the fall. He eyed a single, horizontal column of ice near the floor of the cave. That

was his target. His entire world honed to a fine point – that single blue cylinder becoming his entire universe.

Only a few yards away.

Only a few feet.

Frank reached out with both hands, his claws carving desperately into the ice. He could feel one nail crack from the strain, and the muscles in his forearms felt like they were on fire. Yet he managed to cut a semi-circular path through the column as he slung around it, shifting his downward momentum, and using the column of ice to slingshot himself toward Silver.

He was near the ground now, but speeding feet-first overtop the ice. His enhanced feet carved through the ranks of the leeches in his path. Their bodies exploded on impact, shards of ice that cut and tore through his skin. Each explosion sounded like he had struck a gong, a deafening series of blasts ricocheting through the canyon as he cut a furrow through the leeches.

Silver's glowing blue eyes caught sight of Frank and widened slightly as she noticed the path of carnage he left in his wake. It was at this point that Frank noticed the wall behind her and realized he was going too fast.

He hadn't really considered how to stop.

Silver didn't have much help to offer. She stepped nimbly to the side, snapping at another leech, and carving its crystal body cleanly in half.

Frank closed his eyes and braced his transformed legs.

Damn it, this is going to hurt.

He smashed into the wall with a thunderous crash. The blow made the entire side of the canyon shudder from the force of the impact. Leeches toppled from the wall, smashing against the floor even as a shower of ice and debris rocketed into the air. A massive fracture speared through the wall of the canyon, growing and spreading above him.

Frank groaned. Red notifications were flashing in his peripheral vision, and the world swam when he opened his eyes. His health was low. Everything below his waist was just one throbbing, dull ache. He couldn't bring himself to look down. He wasn't sure he could handle that.

He didn't have time to wait for his natural regeneration to heal his wounds. The ice above him rumbled and groaned, and he could already see the pillars in the room beginning to crash downward in a hail of ice. He tried to lift himself, only to find his legs unresponsive.

Finally, he looked down.

His legs were a mess of blood. His *Wolf Form* had disappeared, leaving pale human flesh stained red with his own blood. He could

feel his stomach heave as he saw something ivory and sharp jutting from his skin at an unnatural angle.

It's not real. You know it's not real, he tried to remind himself, looking away. *You will be fine.* However, some primal part of his brain wasn't convinced, and he was struggling to fight down his own rising panic.

Frank rolled onto his side and manage to drag himself forward with his hands. He just had to make it a few dozen yards to the tunnel entrance that loomed ahead of him. The two columns he had used for his crazy attack crashed against the floor in a cacophony of noise. Massive blocks of ice were starting to rain down around him, falling away from the canyon wall, and smashing into the floor.

Then Silver was there by his side.

"Tunnel," he shouted at Silver, pointing in the direction of the nearby tunnel entrance. "Need to hurry."

Silver's glowing blue eyes widened, looking at something behind Frank. He craned his neck and felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. The situation was worse than he had expected. The two columns of ice had crashed through many more, slamming into the ground and sending out a tidal wave of snow and ice that was hurtling toward them – consuming the cave leeches in its path like a hungry blizzard. On top of that, the entire side of the canyon where Frank had struck the walls was beginning to break apart, and massive cracks stretched through the icy blue surface.

Before Frank could react, Silver's mouth wrapped around his torso. His first thought was that she had finally decided to get rid of him. Although, he couldn't really complain – at least it would end the ache in his legs. Besides, getting chomped in half might be better than getting crushed under several tons of ice. He had been there and done that before.

However, her mouth was gentle, and Silver simply lifted him onto her back. Suddenly realizing her intent, he wound his hands in her fur to get a firm grip.

This was barely enough to keep him atop Silver as she raced through the cave. She made Frank's feeble attempts at parkour look like child's play, her paws allowing her to bounce off the columns and wind her way through the remaining leeches in a flash of ivory fur and fangs.

The cavern was collapsing above them even as the avalanche followed hot on their heels. More and more chunks of ice crashed into the ground as Silver raced forward. One block slammed into a nearby leech, smashing its body to pieces. Silver barely avoided another, twisting in a sudden move that almost threw Frank from his precarious perch on her back.

Finally, they crested the mouth of the tunnel, sliding into the dark opening.

It wasn't a moment too late.

The wall of the canyon collapsed behind them. Ice crashed into the ground with a splintering roar of sound. The frozen debris shattered the remaining leeches that were too slow to get out of the way and then hurtled outward in a roiling wave of ice and snow. The sound itself was deafening. A freight train had just hurtled into the windchime factory this time, and Frank pressed his hands to his ears, feeling warm blood trickling between his fingers as his eardrums finally called it quits.

A miniature glacier suddenly rocketed toward the tunnel entrance, and Frank and Silver scrambled to move farther back into the tunnel.

It struck with a thunderous crash, obscuring what little light remained.

And then Frank found himself lying in a tunnel, pushed up against Silver's large wolf-like form. A dozen notifications flashed in his peripheral vision, and his gaze swam – bright stars dancing in front of him – and his legs throbbed with an oppressive ache.

But they were alive.

We made it.

That was his last thought before the world went dark.

Chapter 14 - Intimate

When Frank came to, he noticed two things.

First, he was still alive. The dull ache in his limbs and the insistent notifications flashing in the corners of his vision like irritating fireflies drove that point home.

Second, something very warm was cradled in his arms.

He blinked to clear his vision. The tunnel was incredibly dark now that access to the underground canyon had been closed off by a massive wall of ice. He felt disoriented in the darkness, struggling to remember how he had gotten here.

He had been arguing with Silver – that strange crimson glow feeding his own anger. He had seen things and said things that he shouldn't have. Then Silver had attacked him…

Suddenly, the memories came flooding back. The frozen cockroaches, the deafening chimes, the massive cave-in. He could only assume that he must have passed out – his stamina and injuries finally getting the best of him. The red notifications that still flickered in his peripheral vision lent some support to that conclusion.

Frank felt something move against him, and he looked down.

Despite the lack of light, his *Night Vision* still allowed him to make out the familiar form snuggled against him. Silver lay on her side, her back pressed firmly into his chest. For a moment, he panicked, looking at her more closely. Was she okay?

Frank soon breathed a sigh of relief. Her chest rose and fell in a regular gentle rhythm, and he couldn't see any obvious signs of injury. Her eyes were pressed shut, and he could only assume that she had passed out as well. He began to relax…

And then froze in place.

He might have a very real problem snuggled up against him right now. Silver was alive, but he wasn't at all sure how she would react to this situation if she woke up. His brutal death felt like a real possibility, especially since she had been trying to kill him just before they got attacked. Well, and basically the entire time she'd known him.

He needed to find a way to slowly extricate himself. Yet, at the same time, Frank found that he rather enjoyed the sensation of her warmth pressed against him. The way her chest rose and fell slightly, and her ears twitched in her sleep. He wanted to touch them, wondering idly if they were as soft as they looked.

Damn it, focus.

Frank eased back, trying to put a little distance between them. His right arm was trapped underneath Silver, and so he was going to need to lift her slightly to back away. However, as he pulled away, cold air rushed to fill the gap between them. Silver let out a faint murmur and wiggled back against him again.

For a moment, he considered whether this would be such a bad way to die. Then he remembered who he was talking about – Silver's familiar angry glare appearing in his mind's eye. He hadn't missed how easily she had snapped those cave leeches in half with her fangs. No, Silver wouldn't just kill him – she would likely torture him first.

There was nothing for it. He was going to have to sort of shove her aside and claim he had tossed and turned in his sleep or something – with a heavy emphasis on the "or something."

Okay, on three.

One.

Two.

Silver suddenly stretched, pulling away from him and sitting up. Frank did his best to pretend to be asleep, despite his sudden shock at her waking up. However, he couldn't entirely prevent a sharp intake of breath as Silver pulled away. Her ears twitched at the sound.

She turned, her irises glowing softly even in the darkness of the tunnel. Frank watched her through half-lidded eyes, saying a mental prayer to whatever deity might protect him from the wrath of an angry wolf girl. Yet as the seconds ticked by, Silver didn't try to tear him limb from limb. She simply stared at him, a strange unreadable expression on her face.

Silver moved suddenly, and Frank felt a flare of pain along his cheek. He shot up, cradling his face where Silver had smacked him.

"Ow, shit," Frank muttered.

"Wake up, idiot," she grunted, before taking a seat on the opposite side of the narrow tunnel, her sapphire eyes glaring at him in the darkness.

Frank rose up to a sitting position, the two looking at each other. They both knew what had transpired just before they were attacked by the leeches and a heavy silence hung in the air, neither of them sure what to say to break the tension.

Replaying their fight in his head, Frank felt sort of guilty. Sure, Silver held her fair share of blame, but his anger had now faded in the aftermath of the encounter with the cave leeches. Almost dying sort of put things in better perspective. He winced as he recalled the pained look on Silver's face when he had said those things about her pushing people away. It might have been true, but he still shouldn't have said it.

"Uh, so look. I'm sorry I said that stuff," Frank offered

tentatively. “I’m not really sure what came over me…” He trailed off, his eyes distant.

Silver let out a frustrated growl, and he glanced up at her sharply. She wasn’t looking at him. Instead, she was staring at the wall and chewing on her lip with her sharp canines. “I… I’m sorry too,” she finally said, the words sounding like they were painful for her to admit.

Frank raised an eyebrow. “Oh, about what exactly?” He couldn’t quite resist the teasing grin he felt tugging at his lips. This was the first sign of remorse he’d ever seen Silver show.

She glared back at him. “I should have told you what was in the canyon, and I let my anger get the best of me.”

“What about that part where you tried to kill me?” Frank suggested, his smile widening.

“I actually don’t regret that part,” she snapped back, although he caught a faint trace of amusement in her eyes.

“While we’re on the subject, I also kind of saved you from those leeches,” Frank said, egging her on a little.

“Saved me?” Silver asked with an incredulous expression. “Is that what you call it after you caved in half the canyon and almost killed us both? That was… reckless. Stupid.” She seemed to lose the ability to form complete sentences, the last two words coming out in an angry growl.

Silver shook her head, glaring at him again. “Besides, after your heroically stupid rescue attempt, I seem to remember carrying your useless injured self into the tunnel.”

Frank’s smile widened, and he shrugged. “Well, it worked, and we’re still alive. At least for now.” Then his expression sobered. “But joking aside, thank you,” he said in a sincere voice.

Silver looked at him in surprise.

“For saving me, I mean,” Frank continued. “I probably wouldn’t have made it into the tunnel without your help.”

She sniffed and glanced away. “Don’t get used to it. That was the first and last time you will ever ride me.”

Frank had to stifle the urge to make a lewd joke at her choice of words – immediately thinking again about how warm Silver had felt pressed against him. But he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“I am not a horse,” she muttered.

“I never said you were,” Frank offered cautiously. “Like I said, thank you.”

A short silence hung over the tunnel.

“I know you don’t like me, and you have every right to be cautious of strangers,” Frank began slowly. “But I don’t wish to harm anyone – you or your people. And it seems like we’re sort of even on

dumbass mistakes now.

"Maybe we could call a truce?" he continued, offering a hand to her in the darkness. "At least until we get out of this hellhole?"

His palm hovered in the air and Silver looked at it uncertainly.

Then she gingerly placed her hand in his own. He noticed for the first time that her nails were rather sharp – almost claw-like, despite being in human form.

Silver withdrew her hand, but she seemed to hesitate, opening and closing her mouth as though trying to decide how to frame her next few words.

"Speaking of which… um, before we were attacked, you said some things to me that—"

"I'm sorry again," Frank interrupted suddenly. "That was cruel, and I shouldn't have said it."

Silver ground her teeth together. "I don't disagree, but my question is how you *knew* those things in the first place," she said, looking at him now, curiosity and uncertainty flitting across her face. "You couldn't have known those details, and I've never heard the other pack members mention my… history."

Frank saw something in Silver's expression that he didn't recognize – at least not on *her* face. She looked almost vulnerable. He doubted that she had told many people about her mother or herself. He needed to be careful in how he framed his response.

"I honestly don't know," Frank said, rubbing at his neck. "I remember feeling super angry, but it felt like it was coming from outside myself. It got worse the more upset you became, and then my vision started to go red like I was activating my *Rage* ability." His words were distant now as he recalled what had happened.

"And then you mentioned your mother… and I saw these images. I think they were of you. Something about a naming ritual. Then killing a traveler. Then you by the lake outside the Ancestor Tree. I got this sense of what was happening – it wasn't so much words as a *feeling*."

He shook his head. "It was strange."

Frank looked up to find Silver staring at him, her sapphire eyes wide in the darkness. As she saw him looking at her, she glanced away quickly.

"Maybe you reached *Communion*?" she murmured uncertainly. "Although, it is unusual for it to work so easily with another person. Most are only able to connect with animals or plants."

Frank cocked his head. Now that was an intriguing thought. "Well, I can check my notifications," he offered, and Silver gave him a curt nod.

He swiped at the air, bringing up the barrage of notices he had

been ignoring.

System Notice

Prolonged and extensive activity has drained your stamina, and your body has been critically injured. You have gone unconscious. Duration unknown.

x9 Level Up!
You have (50) undistributed stat points.

Shift Form: Bear Level Up!

Level	Effect 1	Effect 2
1	+8.7% Bear's STR	
Locked		
Locked		
Locked		
Cost	30 Stamina/Second (Scaling)	
Total integration 23%. Limbs unlocked 1/4.		

Shift Form: Wolf Level Up!

Level	Effect 1	Effect 2
1	+10% Wolf's Speed	
Locked		
Locked		
Locked		
Cost	30 Stamina/Second (Scaling)	
Total integration 59%. Limbs unlocked 1/4.		

x2 Skill Rank Up: Sprint
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4
Effect 1: 11% speed increase.
Effect 2: -12% stamina drain.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Toughness
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 6
Effect 1: -8.5% decreased damage and pain.
Effect 2: Reduced fatigue duration by 17%.

New Skill: Fang and Claw
You have adapted to the use of multiple different shifts at the same time, allowing you to combine your shapeshifting abilities depending on the situation. Masters of this discipline are capable of incredible feats of strength and flexibility, turning their own bodies into a tapestry of destruction and mayhem.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect 1: 5% balance and agility when using multiple shifts.

Frank grimaced. He had gained a new skill, but not the one he had been looking for. None of his notifications mentioned *Communion*.

What the hell was going on? He had definitely sensed Silver's emotions and had even glimpsed what he could only assume were her memories. He had done *something* there. Why couldn't the game cut him a break?

"So?" Silver asked.

"Nothing," Frank answered, shaking his head as he swept away the notifications. "I'm not sure what happened if that wasn't *Communion*."

"Maybe it just wasn't enough to unlock the skill," Silver offered, although he saw confusion lingering in her gaze.

"Maybe…" Frank murmured.

A part of him doubted that was the answer. The sensation hadn't looked like the multi-colored tendrils of energy he had seen Sophie use on Herbert. It had also felt similar to the raw, untamed emotions he had experienced when he had lost control and slain the Burrower. It was like some primitive, angry part of his mind had bubbled to the surface.

He had to admit that some part of him had almost *enjoyed* it. He wouldn't normally consider himself an angry person – if anything, he tended to bottle up his own emotions. But the untamed rage felt freeing. Both with Silver and with the Burrower, he had just *acted* without getting caught up in his own head. Regardless, it frightened him. He had lost control – lost himself – in those moments.

"Anyway," Silver said, interrupting his thoughts as she rose to her feet, "that can be a problem for another time. Right now, we need to find a way out of these caves."

"So, we're done here?" Frank asked in shock. "We're just going to leave?"

"There is little point in staying further," Silver replied calmly. "This trial is meant to help a person reach *Communion*. Moments of intense stress or extreme conflict can be a way to unlock that sort of

progress. I'd say we have already experienced our fair share of stress – with mixed results," she added in a dry tone.

Frank could only stare at her. That made sense, but it felt wrong to just give up. He was so close. He had definitely done *something*.

"Maybe we could just—" Frank began.

Silver cut him off. "What? Get us both killed? Some of us don't come back after death," she reminded him. Despite the edge to her voice, Silver wasn't being unkind. He sensed some compassion in her eyes. She seemed to understand his frustration and his drive to unlock his abilities. Maybe she had been rooting for him more than he had realized.

Frank grimaced. He knew that she was right. There was no sense in putting her in even more danger for his own benefit. She had already given a lot – far more than he probably deserved.

"Okay, you're right," Frank said, meeting her gaze again. "We can find another way. So how do we get out of here?"

"Give me a moment," Silver replied as she swiped at the air, her glowing eyes skimming a map Frank couldn't see.

"Oh no…" she muttered only a moment later.

"I don't like the sound of that. What's wrong?" Frank asked.

She glanced at him. "This tunnel isn't on my map. We're also quite deep in the canyon. We must have run farther than I realized," she murmured almost to herself.

"So, what are you saying?" Frank asked, dread settling in his stomach. Now he wasn't just thinking of himself. Worst-case scenario, he could kill himself and respawn back in the Twilight Throne. But Silver…

As Frank met her glowing blue eyes, he could see the same realization mirrored there. Even without unlocking *Communion*, he could practically feel Silver's fear, despite how she tried to maintain her composure. It was the way her hand shook slightly as she swiped away the map and her tail drooped.

"I'm saying we're lost," she said bluntly.

Chapter 15 - Demonic

Frank and Silver had been wandering through one icy cavern after another for what felt like hours. Frank had been able to maintain a relatively upbeat attitude at first, trying to nudge Silver to talk – which had only earned him a series of glares and eye rolls.

Seriously, had the girl taken some sort of masterclass?

However, as more and more time passed, it was becoming clear that Silver was beginning to lose hope. Her ears and tail had lost their energetic bounce, and the natural glow in her eyes had faded. No amount of Frank's stupid comments or poor jokes could fix that.

So, the pair had lapsed into a tense silence.

As they kept walking, it felt like the caverns had grown colder. Frank tugged his furs closer, noting with a frown that there were a few cuts and tears in the fabric that hadn't been there before. He supposed that, after their near-death encounter with the leeches, it could have been much worse.

What didn't make sense was why the chill kept growing the farther they walked. It was almost colder in these lower caverns than it had been above ground – with the howling winds and swirling snow and ice. Windchill alone should have immediately made the caves a warmer climate – which, unfortunately, was an authentic "game feature" he hadn't loved in practice.

Frank had also noticed a rather strange absence of leeches. It might be that they had stumbled into an abandoned complex of caves and tunnels – entirely separate from the main canyon, but that felt too convenient. Given the number of leeches that had attacked them, he would have expected to find at least one nest or some sort of other living creature.

Instead, they had found a whole lot of nothing.

Silver paused up ahead. She stood at an underground crossroads, the tunnel branching at haphazard angles in two different directions. This intersection looked familiar, but so did the rest of the cobalt caverns they had walked through. The blue passageways were all starting to blur together in Frank's head.

Silver swiped at the air, her eyes skimming an invisible map.

"Which way?" Frank asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure that it matters," Silver murmured, before glancing back at him with a bleak expression. "None of these tunnels seem to connect back to the canyon."

"Could I see?" Frank offered.

With a shrug, Silver pawed at the air again, and a translucent screen shimmered into existence. The image floated in front of him, providing a three-dimensional map of the cavern complex – a complicated series of hollowed-out caves connected by thin tunnels.

Frank could see the massive underground canyon far above them. The side tunnel that they had used as an escape had wound even farther underground until it connected with a labyrinth of caves and tunnels. Frank could see that Silver had been trying to choose paths that had them walking upward or that tended to head toward the canyon. However, each had either hit a dead end or had circled back to the same complex of caves.

It was clear that they were running out of options.

They had nearly explored the entire cave complex, and it did indeed seem to be an independent, closed system. They were standing at the final intersection, and Frank could see that their last option branched to the left. There was a blank spot on the map where that tunnel led, indicating that they hadn't explored that area yet. Instead, they seemed to have circled the same spot through other caves and tunnels. At a glance, it didn't look like heading in that direction would offer an escape route.

However, as he rotated the map, he saw a few holes where there *might* be enough room for adjoining tunnels or caves. It was a chance – and the last one they had.

"What about this path right here?" Frank suggested, tracing it with his finger.

"We can certainly try it," Silver replied. Although she hadn't said it aloud, the "but" hung in the air. Frank already knew what she was going to say. It was a longshot that this next cave would offer a way to escape. And she wasn't exactly wrong.

"Or, you could take the quick way out," she murmured.

"Not going to happen," Frank said, more firmly than he intended.

Silver glanced up at him in surprise.

"What? You can be a real pain, but I'm still not leaving you down here," Frank insisted. "If this next tunnel doesn't pan out, we'll head back to the cave-in, and I'll dig our way out."

"Through a few dozen yards of ice? And I'm sure the leeches won't notice that noise, right?" Silver answered skeptically, apparently letting his comment slide. He was almost sad when it didn't earn him another glare.

"Fine! Then I'll dig a hole from one of these other tunnels," he said, waving a hand at the map. "My point is that I'm not giving up, and neither are you."

With that, he turned on his heel and started down the tunnel,

not bothering to check whether Silver was following him. Although, he belatedly heard the telltale tap of her feet slapping against the floor behind him.

Despite his attempt to reassure Silver, he wasn't sure what to do if this last tunnel was a flop, and a small irritating voice in the back of his head kept reminding him that this was at least partly his fault.

If he had just listened to Silver instead of getting irritated…

Or if he had just taken another couple of seconds to think through his escape plan before bringing part of the canyon crashing down around them…

Frank shook his head. Or maybe they would have died if he hadn't acted the way he did. Whether or not he had made the right decision didn't change their situation *right now*. Either way, this wouldn't be another repeat of his battle with Alexion – the image of the fallen Kin coming unbidden, their vacant white eyes staring blindly.

He shuddered, his resolve hardening. He wouldn't let anything happen to Silver. Whatever it took, he was getting her out of here.

Silver's hand suddenly rested on his arm, bringing him to a halt. She pointed wordlessly at the walls of the tunnel. Frank had been so deep in thought that he hadn't noticed that the tunnel around him had begun to change.

Actually, it didn't look much like a "tunnel" anymore.

The irregular ice that lined the walls up to this point had been cut into a perfectly square corridor, and the surface had been polished to a mirror-like sheen. Even with the poor lighting, it was clear that this wasn't a natural cave formation. It looked like it had been… created.

Frank looked back at Silver and saw confusion in her eyes as well. She just shook her head slightly, but placed a cautious finger to her lips, urging him to be quiet. This time, Frank decided to listen to her.

The pair moved forward more cautiously now, stepping softly on the ice floor. Up ahead, Frank saw that the hallway terminated into a much larger room, light spilling into the corridor and reflecting off the smooth floor.

As they inched out of the hallway, they were met with a strange sight.

It was as though someone had transplanted a medieval study into a frozen underground cave. The room was perfectly square, the floor adorned with a thick rug, and there was ornate wooden furniture placed tastefully about the space. The light was projected from a floating orb that hovered near the ceiling. Frank half expected to see a

roaring fire on one side of the room, but whatever interior designer had taken up residence down here must have decided that was impractical. Go figure.

However, he still couldn't explain what he was seeing.

"What is this?" Frank muttered.

"Why this is my study of course," a voice spoke up. Frank's hand reached for his weapons – only to realize once again that he didn't have his axes. At the same time, Silver let out a low-pitch growl, her skin shimmering in a multi-colored glow.

A chair scooted back, screeching slightly against the ice and a slender figure stood, turning to face the pair. He was an older gentleman, with black hair that was graying at the edges and a bald patch dotting the crown of his head. Metal spectacles rested on his nose, and he held a book in his hand, a finger marking his spot. The rest of his clothing was what Frank would have expected to see in a noble's manor – not a frozen cave a few hundred feet below a mountain.

"It has been so long since I've had guests," the man said, a broad smile stretching across his face. "To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking to?"

Frank coughed, trying to cover his confusion. "Uh, I'm Frank, and this is Silver."

"Who the hell are you?" Silver demanded bluntly – refusing to adopt any pleasantries. This earned her a glare from Frank.

Are you really going to antagonize the super-weird stranger reading a book in his hidden ice study? He tried to impart that message with a look, but from the way Silver ignored him, he wasn't sure if the point landed.

"Ahh, my apologies, I should have introduced myself first. My name is Palo Asher Lume," the man explained, offering a short bow. He didn't seem perturbed by Silver's tone.

"So, the first somewhat obvious question: what exactly are you doing in a cave beneath a mountain range?" Frank asked, starting to wonder if he might be hallucinating. Maybe they were both unconscious and slowly freezing to death right now while sharing some sort of lucid dream.

That seemed more plausible than the current situation.

"Ahh, that's an interesting story, but a rather long one. Why don't you take a seat?" Palo offered. At a gesture, two chairs slid across the floor and came to a rest near the pair.

Okay, clearly a magic user, Frank thought to himself. Although, he wasn't certain what type of magic would have allowed the elderly man to move the chairs.

Frank and Silver sat down tentatively, but Silver looked like

she'd much rather be in her *Wolf Form* right now. Or, maybe torturing Palo for answers.

"Now that we're more comfortable, the short answer to your question is that I live down here," Palo explained, gesturing at the study. For the first time, Frank noticed a rather plain door along the back wall, a drape half obscuring the portal. He'd have to remember that for later. Maybe they had finally found a way out of this hellhole.

"I've been in the Chasm a number of times before, and I've never met anyone that lives down here," Silver said, eyeing the man skeptically.

"Ahh, but you *have*," Palo explained happily. "Except that you know me as the 'Beast' – although, I must say that the name lacks imagination."

Silver flinched, her hand gripping the arm of her chair so hard that the wood began to crack. She stared at the older gentleman like he had just grown two heads.

"I see you don't believe me," Palo continued, eyeing Silver with a concerned look. "Perhaps a demonstration will help!"

In a flash, the old man vanished and was replaced by a hulking giant covered in mangy white fur, speckled with crystals of ice that hung from its body. Its eyes blazed a brilliant sapphire and tendrils of mist crept from its nose and mouth, centered between massive yellow-tinged tusks. Even more strangely, the beast was still sitting sedately in the chair, which wobbled precariously under its newfound weight.

In the next instant, Palo was back, still sitting calmly in the chair.

Frank glanced between the old man and Silver, his mind trying to both process this weird series of events and reconcile the monster he had just seen with the kind-looking elderly gentleman before him. However, the look of fear and confusion on Silver's face was enough to confirm to him that what they had just seen matched her memory of the Beast.

"How… what…?" Silver muttered, trying to frame her question. The poor armrests of her chair probably wouldn't ever be the same with the way her nails were digging into them. Even as Frank watched, one of the wooden arms finally broke free, still clutched in Silver's hand.

"I'm sorry for the scare," Palo offered contritely, "but it really is much easier to show rather than tell. I'm sure you understand."

"Okay, but how did you just do that?" Frank asked. "Did you shapeshift or…"

"Oh, nothing so vulgar or *physical*," Palo replied, waving a hand. "It was simply an illusion. Not terribly difficult if you have the water mana and the experience. And in my case, I have plenty of

both," he explained, gesturing about the icy cave.

That just opened a rabbit hole of additional questions.

Palo seemed to pick up on their stunned confusion – not that it was difficult with the way they were both staring at him with their mouths open.

The older man let out a sigh. "Perhaps I should start over." He placed a hand to his chest. "*I* am a demon."

Chapter 16 - Misleading

"A demon?" Frank asked, his question hanging in the air.

Frank and Silver were both trying to decide whether to run or attack, their muscles tense and ready to spring. But Palo's friendly demeanor and tone caused them to land somewhere in the middle. Although, Frank wasn't sure their current strategy of "stare stupidly at the strange old man hidden in an ice cave who claims to be a demon" was going to turn out well for them.

"Yes, exactly," Palo said with a nod of his head. His gaze bounced between the pair, seeing from their vacant, confused stares that they were having some difficulty processing his explanation. "Would either of you like some tea? I find it helps calm the nerves."

"Uh, sure," Frank replied.

With a snap of Palo's fingers, a tea kettle and two cups lifted from one side of the room and floated toward Frank and Silver. The kettle hovered in place for a moment, vibrating slightly as a red glow enveloped the china. Neatly, it dipped and poured two cups of steaming tea, streamers of vapor rising into the air.

A teacup settled gently on Frank's palm, and he stared at it, sharing a look with Silver out of the corner of his eye. Neither of them drank a drop.

"It's not poisoned, I assure you," Palo said.

"No offense, but that's the sort of thing a demon would say after he poisoned the magic tea," Frank pointed out.

"Really?" Palo asked with a raised eyebrow. "And how many demons have you met exactly? You really should strive to challenge negative stereotypes."

Frank cocked his head at this question. He was forced to admit that the answer was zero. And he hadn't missed that Palo was not-so-subtly calling him a *demon racist*. Yet he and Silver still made no move to drink the tea.

Palo let out a sigh. "Fine, here!" Another snap of his fingers and the kettle poured a third cup – which he sipped gingerly.

"You could be immune to poison," Silver said through gritted teeth.

"Why would I need to poison you when I could simply kill you?" Palo replied dryly. When this raised the hair on Silver's ears and tail, he amended quickly, "Not that I would, of course. I'm just pointing out that if I *wanted* to harm you, there are easier ways. Besides, neither of you appears to be very… *ripe*, let us say."

That was a worrying thought that Frank wasn't certain he wanted to explore – both the fact that Palo seemed confident in his ability to kill them both and that they somehow didn't seem *tasty* enough to warrant killing. Either way, he supposed Palo had a point, and he gingerly sipped at his tea. It tasted faintly of oranges.

And he didn't die.

Drinking the tea also gave Frank a moment to consider Palo. The strange elderly gentleman had used several different types of magic. He had implied that water magic let him power his illusions, which sort of made sense. But how had he warmed the cup? That would have required fire magic. Much less the levitation – possibly earth or air? Or both? And then there was the ball of light illuminating the room, a common light magic spell Frank recognized.

"How are you able to use multiple types of magic?" Frank asked.

"Ahh, there we go! The shock has finally begun to wear off," Palo replied, a broad smile tugging at his wrinkled lips. "The answer is quite simple actually, I eat mana. Or *consume* it, I should say. I can then store and use the mana at will. The rest is simple training. I've picked up a few spells over the years."

"Okay…" Frank murmured to himself. That seemed like an incredibly powerful ability. Palo might be able to master all six schools of magic given enough time and access to different forms of mana.

"So, the next big question is probably why are you in this cave?" Frank continued.

A frown creased the older gentleman's lips. "That was not by choice. Believe it or not, I don't consider a random cave in the middle of an ice-blasted wasteland to be prime real estate." He sighed before continuing. "The short answer is that I was exiled here."

"By whom?" Silver asked. She had begun to overcome her hesitation when she realized Palo wasn't planning to kill them – at least not immediately. Although, she still hadn't touched the tea.

"By the gods, or what was left of them before they were knocked off their petty thrones," Palo grumbled.

Frank could feel a weight settle in his stomach. If Palo wasn't a fan of the in-game gods, then he should play his cards close to the vest. Mentioning his relationship with Jason and the Twilight Throne might not be a good idea. "Why exile you?"

"Because I'm a demon," Palo replied shortly, taking another sip. "They exiled all of my kind. They saw us as a threat."

He hesitated for a moment, rubbing at his chin with his free hand. "The gods are unique. They both create and feed off the mana tied to their affinity. The pattern is somewhat cyclical. They recruit

followers and those little zealots generate a great deal of ambient mana. They then collect the mana for their own purposes. As a result, the gods tend to set down roots in one place in order to create a wellspring of power, effectively harvesting the mana from their followers."

Palo tilted his head. "This is the simplistic version, of course. There are a few additional constraints, although those *covenants* were certainly not conceded to willingly."

The elderly man placed a hand to his chest. "My kind are quite different. We don't produce. We only take. And the gods are protective of their little mana fountains. Although, admittedly, some of my kind tend to look at these elemental cities like banquet tables. They may have gone a bit… overboard in the past."

So, he is incredibly old. Frank was starting to realize that this benign-looking old man could probably squash them if given half a chance – if that point hadn't been obvious enough already.

"Wait, so how would a demon *consume* mana?" Frank asked, already suspecting he was going to regret knowing the answer. He noticed Silver shoot him a nervous look.

Palo raised an eyebrow, gesturing at the cup in his hand. "All creatures carry mana. They are like living teacups, their bodies a vessel for our sustenance," he explained.

Frank stared at him for a moment until it clicked.

"You… you eat people?"

Palo waved a hand. "The drinking metaphor works a bit better, but the idea is essentially the same. And our appetites aren't limited to humans. However, many creatures carry less mana than their human counterparts." Palo didn't seem too contrite about his explanation – as though it were commonplace. To be fair, it very well might be. Frank had gotten accustomed to eating raw animal hearts, after all.

Silver, however, didn't find this explanation as easy to digest. Her face had gone deathly pale – not that Frank could really blame her. They *were* having tea with some sort of ancient mana-vampire, and she had already made it clear that she wasn't too fond of his *Consume* ability.

"Alright, but why are you still here?" Frank asked. "The gods were banished quite some time ago, weren't they?" He could remember that from his conversations with Thorn and Jason. Those same gods might have begun to return this world, but decades must have passed where Palo had been free to leave the caves.

Palo chuckled. "It was more like a divine *time-out* – the kind you impose on little children who become too unruly. No, despite the harsh conditions, I much prefer my cave. It is simple and out of the way. Besides, food here is more than plentiful, if a bit lacking in

variety, and my leeches make the gathering process quite easy."

Another piece clicked into place. This must be why they hadn't seen any leeches or living creatures in this portion of the caverns, and it explained the mana drain. The leeches must hunt for the demon – possibly feeding on the native animals. That would explain how Palo had such an ample amount of water mana. But to be able to create semi-sentient creatures in such large quantities… that was a power far past anything that Frank had encountered before.

Which led to his final question.

"So, would you be willing to… er… let us leave the caves?" Frank asked.

Palo laughed again, as though this was a silly question. "Of course! I wouldn't want to undermine my deal with Silver and her little town. By all means, please feel free to leave whenever you please." He waved at the plain wooden door behind him – half obscured by a curtain. "That door should take you straight to the surface."

Frank spared a questioning look at Silver when Palo mentioned a deal, but she simply looked away. The residents of Haven had struck a deal with this creature? But Silver had seemed surprised when he'd revealed that he was a demon. Which meant they had negotiated with the Beast? But why? He shook his head. Now probably wasn't the time to deal with these questions. Their first priority was getting back to the surface.

"Well, uh, then if you don't mind, I think we'll be off," Frank said tentatively, rising to his feet and setting down his teacup on a nearby table. Silver followed his lead.

"Thanks for the tea," Frank added awkwardly.

Palo just watched them, a smile on his face.

Not knowing what else to say, Frank stepped toward the doorway – half expecting to find something that would kill him on the other side. This had been way, way too easy so far. His hand turned the handle and pulled, holding his breath without realizing it.

The door swung open easily, revealing a plain, icy tunnel. However, there was nothing that looked like it would kill them.

He stepped through.

Frank crossed the threshold and looked back into the room, Silver standing close behind him. He let out a sigh of relief.

He had been worried for no reason. Maybe he was just used to the game continuously messing with him.

Yet he felt his breath hitch in his throat as a blue mist spiraled away from the walls of the study. He opened his mouth to shout a warning at Silver, but it was too late. The cloud of vapor swept through the room in a rush, consuming everything in its path and

obscuring it behind an opaque fog.

Frank could feel the floor tremble beneath him and looked down, noticing that intricate sapphire designs were now glowing along the ground. He stood in a small blank spot in the center of the pattern, his brow furrowed in confusion. He had seen similar designs before – when Eliza laid her traps.

Damn it.

He started to move, but he didn't make it very far. Frozen walls of ice speared into the air all around Frank, encasing him in a frozen box and his fists slammed against the thick surface. Meanwhile, the rolling blue mist blew away, revealing that he was now standing in a transparent, square cell in the middle of what was now a large cavern.

The sharp-edged walls had disappeared and had been replaced by jagged, haphazardly formed ice. Similarly, the room's rich furnishings had vanished. Instead, piles of ivory objects coated the floor. They looked eerily familiar. As Frank peered closer, he saw that they were bones of all shapes and sizes. The remains practically covered the floor of the cavern. Frank could feel his heart begin to race as he realized many of the remains looked distinctly human.

Frank looked up and found Silver standing on the other side of the ice, her glowing blue eyes wide as she stared back at Frank. Behind her was something out of a nightmare. Silver caught Frank's gaze and turned slowly.

A thin, pale creature stood only a few feet away. Its body was grotesque and wasted, its limbs barely an inch or two in diameter as though the creature had no fat or muscle. Its skin looked like it had been pulled taut across brittle bone. Yet it was the creature's face that made Frank shudder. Its eyes were a multi-colored miasma of madness, and its mouth hung open – its jaw rigid and unmoving. Frank couldn't make out any teeth, just a soulless black void that seemed to devour the scant light in the cave.

"Ahh it is a relief to let that spell lapse," Palo said. His voice seemed to come from nowhere – his jaw not moving.

"That was an illusion? All of that?" Frank asked in shock. How was that even possible? He had sat down on a chair! He had drunk tea!

"Of course," Palo intoned, no emotion coloring his voice – he spoke only in a hollow, dull monotone. "Water mana can be used to replicate the feel of objects, and advanced illusions can even mimic taste or smell. Although, the spell is costly to maintain – already I feel *hungry*."

"Why did you do this? Why trap him?" Silver demanded, glaring at the demon. Frank couldn't help but notice that she made no move to *shift* or attack the creature. "We have a deal."

"A deal? Yes, *we* do indeed have a compact, my little Shifter." Palo took several ponderous steps toward Frank, moving slowly, as though each step was painful. As he passed Silver, she flinched away from him. The creature's hand brushed the ice wall in front of Frank. "Although, this one is not as sweet as the others."

"He isn't intended as a sacrifice," Silver bit out.

Sacrifice? Frank thought to himself. He had assumed the sacrifices were animals or something. He was beginning to suspect he had been wildly off base there.

"No, but perhaps he might offer something more than a simple meal," Palo said, turning to glance at Silver. She edged farther away from the creature. "Or did you not think I would notice the traveler's guild tag? I know of Frank and of Original Sin. The other travelers were quite… *informative*."

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Palo was no friend of the gods. If he knew about Frank's guild, then it was safe to assume that he knew about their connection to the Dark One. But what the hell did he mean by *other* travelers?

Silver took a lurching step forward, growling under her breath. "Don't hurt him."

"You forget yourself, youngling," Palo replied in his neutral voice, turning his mad eyes to Silver. "Or do you wish for me to remove the protections on your valley?" To Frank's surprise, Silver hesitated, backing away slightly and looking at the ground.

"What does he mean?" Frank demanded, smacking his palm against the ice. "What sacrifices? There have been other travelers? How is this… this *thing* protecting Haven?"

Silver couldn't look at him, and he saw her swallow hard, her tail hanging limply behind her. All anger had fled from her eyes. She simply looked defeated.

"Ahh, she is *ashamed* – too ashamed to even answer. That's almost offensive," Palo said. Despite his choice of words, there was no humor in his voice, which was even more disconcerting.

"But I will answer for her," the demon continued, looking back toward Frank. "Silver and her kind cut a deal with me after the cultists tricked them and stole their secrets. They knew something lived in these caverns – a creature of indescribable power. Their *Communion* also allowed them to sense my presence.

"So, they came to me – or at least they approached what they call the 'Beast.' They were *afraid*. I could practically taste their fear. What if others attacked them? The travelers were already growing bolder, reaching into the mountains. It was only a matter of time before they were found again – before someone came looking for their knowledge and their treasures.

“They asked for protection, and I obliged. I am the cause of the storms that rage across these mountains and the ice that blocks passage into their valley. As I said before, I have ample water mana at my disposal.”

Palo turned to look at the bones strewn about the cave. “In return, they bring me little morsels. I did not lie to you, mortal – a diet of only water mana grows tiresome. I want to taste fiery spice, earthy textures, and light sweet airy delights. I want to *feast* on mana in all the colors of the *rainbow*.” As it said this, the demon’s eyes swirled and shifted.

“They began bringing me travelers that wandered into their territory. Your kind are so delightfully flavorful – so many emotions brewing beneath the surface.”

Palo turned back to Frank, watching him with his eerie eyes. “At least, most of you.”

The demon leaned close to the ice, peering at Frank. Its eyes seemed to spiral and coalesce, the colors shifting shape in a disconcerting array of patterns that was almost hypnotizing. “You smell strange. Muted. Unformed. Like a green fruit that has not yet ripened.”

Palo looked at Silver. “Have you brought me a defective morsel?” She didn’t answer, hanging her head and unable to look at Frank.

“No matter,” Palo continued, seemingly unperturbed by Silver’s reaction.

The creature waved a hand, and the ice immediately broke apart and streamed back to the floor. Frank was ready, and he barreled toward the monster – or, at least, he tried to. Instead, he simply sagged to his knees as his vitality began to drain away. He looked down and saw needles of dark energy had punctured his skin. He could only assume this was an advanced form of *Curse of Weakness*.

Of course, Palo can use dark magic! They were still close to the border of the Twilight Throne, after all. There would be plenty of undead creatures, and a decent number of players traveled to the city for dark-magic training.

Damn it.

The demon advanced ever-so-slowly, its joints cracking and creaking with each movement. Yet Frank couldn’t do anything. He was simply locked in place. Once the creature got close, it raised a hand. Spindly white fingers hovered above Frank’s forehead, barely tracing his skin.

“Go ahead and eat me then. Get it over with,” Frank managed to croak, glaring at the demon. “But after I come back, I’m going to go demon hunting.”

“Ahh, that’s what they all say,” Palo said quietly, waving a hand. Another two black needles stabbed into Frank’s flesh, and he suddenly lost the ability to speak. “But I’m sad to say that you won’t be dying – at least not anytime soon. There are other things I wish to learn from you first.”

Frank could feel a heavy weight settle in his stomach. What the hell did the creature mean by that? His thoughts flashed back to Alexion. There was more than one way to effectively destroy a person’s character. Did the demon plan to trap him down here?

“I know you are in league with Jason and the dark deity,” Palo said, his voice barely a whisper. “I have been watching to the south for a long time now. This youth grows bold, building the Dark One’s power swiftly. He is almost ripe – ready for the plucking. So, tell me, Frank. Tell me about *Jason*. Tell me his *weaknesses*.”

The creature placed its pale palm gently on Frank’s forehead and dark tendrils of mana leaked from its fingertips, curling across his skin. Frank locked eyes with Silver. He could see helpless, angry tears budding in her eyes. Yet she simply stood there, letting Palo do as he wished. “Help me,” Frank tried to plead.

Silver took a step forward. “Please don’t do this.”

The demon looked back at her, the patterns in its rainbow eyes shifting and undulating. “Stay where you are, girl. I am the reason your lovely little sister still lives – that your father can pretend he has bartered for your town’s safety to assuage his own heavy heart. I am the reason your people are still alive. Me and me alone. If you interfere, I will ensure not just the destruction of this traveler, but *everyone* you hold dear.”

Silver froze, trembling in indecision. Then Frank watched as she slowly backed down. He could feel despair twist in his stomach, but he couldn’t really blame her. Her people had made a deal with the devil – literally. Acting now meant exposing everyone she cared about to harm. Besides, what hope did she possibly have of defeating this monster?

Then the demon’s attention was back on its prey. Frank’s eyes went wide as he suddenly felt the malignant energy surge into his nose and ears, and his eyes rolled back in his head. The power seemed to wind and twist its way through his mind, sifting through his memories like the pages of a book. It fed on his surface thoughts first, picking up on his anxiety – on his purpose for being in the Chasm.

His tainted *shift*.

“Ahh, you learned your abilities from the cultists,” Palo murmured. “Interesting. Although, I suppose you wouldn’t appreciate the irony.”

The creature withdrew from his mind, then it leaned close,

whispering in Frank's ear so that only he could hear. "I helped them enter the valley. What better way to spread fear? Fear that I used to convince these fools to bring me tasty morsels."

Frank wasn't given a chance to respond as the energy overwhelmed his mind again.

At first, Palo ripped through his thoughts with wild abandon. It was as though his mind was a series of hallways, each memory locked behind a single door. The demon ripped each portal off its hinges and scoured all four corners of each memory before moving on to the next. As Palo ravaged Frank's memories, he forced him to relive them. They were random and haphazard – chaotic.

His tenth birthday.

A high school dance.

Folding laundry.

The demon raced through his memories. Frank could see his path through the game world now. How he had been too scared to fight. How he had clung to other groups. That moment when he had finally overcome his fear and had slain the minotaur king. He remembered the sense of power he had felt as the beast's warm blood wash over his hands – the way that primal fury had overtaken him.

He could sense the demon's amusement. "*So strong… and yet, not nearly strong enough to stop me*," the monster taunted him, its voice echoing through Frank's mind.

At that barb, a kernel of helpless anger began to burn in Frank's chest, his mind rebelling at the intrusion into his thoughts. He tried desperately not to think about Jason, refusing to give the demon what it wanted. Yet the harder he tried to bury a memory – to avoid thinking about it – the easier the door seemed to appear.

"*That's it. Give me what I want*," Palo hissed.

Then something clicked. Frank remembered a silly game from his childhood. You would run up to your friend and dare them not to think of a purple elephant. It was impossible. As soon as you tried "not" to think of something, you invariably did. The trick wasn't to avoid the thought, it was to focus on something else instead.

Frank struggled feebly, trying to think of something – anything – other than what the demon wanted. He fed it video games and homework. The layout of his room and school. The posters on his wall.

Yet these memories were pale and flimsy things, the edges ragged blurry and no emotion attached to them. They were boring and washed out, and Palo strode calmly through those halls, ripping each mental door from its hinges and scouring its contents. They barely slowed him down.

"*I will tease your secrets out eventually*," Palo whispered in his

mind.

"*How about a deal*? *I know you wish to be strong*," the demon hissed. "*I can sense it. I also know why you can't advance your abilities. I know why you can't grow more powerful. Tell me what I want to know, and I will give you the answers you seek. I might even let you go once I'm done with you*.

"*With my help, you could even be stronger than Jason*."

Frank managed to open his eyes then, staring into Palo's swirling irises. With what strength he had left, he tried to speak. Yet it only came out in a murmur.

"What was that?" Palo asked. He waved a hand, and the curse relented slightly.

This was it. This was his chance to break free.

Frank's entire body strained against the curse, his limbs trembling with the effort. Yet it was no use. He couldn't move, no matter how hard he tried. A helpless weight settled in his stomach, and in that moment, he could feel that small kernel of anger flare into a full-fledged flame.

"Fuck. You," Frank croaked.

Palo's eyes flashed, the vortex of color swirling more violently – the only sign of anger that Frank had seen from him. "So be it. Then we shall use force."

Just before the wave of energy struck him and Palo renewed his curses, Frank looked past the demon at Silver. Moisture clung to her eyes, and she trembled as she stood in place – watching Palo torture him. Frank couldn't blame her, not knowing what was at stake, but he also understood now that the demon likely wouldn't stop with him. Even now, he could sense its ravenous, insatiable *hunger*.

"Run," Frank mouthed.

Then the demon's power consumed him.

If it had been a trickle before, it was a flood now. The energy raced through his mind and ripped open his thoughts with wild abandon. The demon invaded Frank's darkest memories. The painful moments he suppressed – the private tears that ran down his face after a rebuke from his parents and the torment he had endured from his classmates. His sister's abuse. His brother's bitter-sweet moments of kindness.

Frank was drowning in the memories as they threatened to overwhelm him.

He also felt that flame of anger growing stronger with each passing second – the same rage that he usually forced aside in the face of the pain that others heaped on his shoulders. His mind practically growled in response to the demon's intrusion – like it was a living creature that had been backed into a corner, its hackles raised, and its

teeth bared. He could almost see the mental projection of this shadowy creature, but it was just out of reach, its form shifting and ethereal, barely held together by his growing *rage*.

At first, he had held back these painful memories, trying to protect himself, but that strange primal part of his mind suddenly whispered advice. *Use them.*

A realization suddenly settled into place. These memories were vivid and strong. Powerful. The mental doors still creaked open, but Palo had to shove, and hiss, and strain each time. And so, Frank stopped trying to hide these pain-filled memories and started using them to slow Palo down. He built mental walls, more hallways, more doors. A labyrinth of despair and self-recrimination that protected a small kernel in the center – the memories of his time with Jason and Riley. He threw all his pain at Palo. All of his torment. All of his self-inflicted hatred.

"*Tell me what I want to know*," the creature shouted in his mind.

"*Fuck you*," Frank's mind shot back – only giving him more pain.

But even with this strategy, Frank was running out of room to run. There was a limit even to his own torment. And the creature was closing in on what it wanted to know now, knocking down the doors faster than Frank could throw them up.

And then Palo stood outside the door to Frank's treasured memories.

"Yes," the creature hissed in his mind. "This is it."

Palo reached out, the mana flooding through Frank's mind with renewed vigor. As the creature reached for the memories it wanted, Frank finally understood true despair. What option did he have left? He would tell Palo what he wanted to know, and then he would die. He would fail. Again.

That primal part of his mind emerged once more in a torrent of raw rage and anger. A black creature – all fangs, and claws, and fury stood in the demon's path. It hissed and growled, shoving back forcefully at Palo as the two waged a battle in Frank's mind.

It wasn't working, though. Frank was still losing. He wasn't nearly strong enough to deny the demon what it wanted. With a massive surge of dark mana, Palo wiped away Frank's last mental defenses, blowing apart the shadowy creature in a blast of energy so intense that Frank felt a lance of pain crash through his head. He could vaguely register that his body was convulsing, his muscles spasming uncontrollably.

And then the demon approached the final door.

Frank couldn't do anything.

He was beaten. Defenseless.

The creature placed a mental hand on the door to Frank's final memories – ever-so-slowly, as though taunting him. Yet just before it could open this last portal, Frank saw the beast's eyes open wide, a swirling kaleidoscopic rainbow of color. Then everything suddenly went black, and Frank fell limply to the floor.

He opened his eyes – his real eyes – blearily, trying to focus on the icy cavern. He was lying on his chest now. His stamina was drained dry, and his stats were slowly beginning to recover from the curse. Notifications were flashing in his peripheral vision, but he ignored them, trying to focus on what was happening in the cave.

Across from him was Palo – his head resting on the floor, and those eerie multi-colored eyes still glowing softly. Frank knew a moment of panic before he realized that the creature's head was no longer attached to its pale-white body and a sickly rainbow liquid leaked from its neck, creating a puddle on the icy floor.

Above him stood Silver – the true Silver. She was a wolf, her eyes blazing with frozen fury and Palo's blood staining her teeth. She stood over the demon's body, her chest heaving, and a low growl rumbled from her throat.

She had saved him.

Chapter 17 - Broken

It took a few minutes for Frank's head to stop pounding. He struggled to a sitting position, cradling his head in his hands. Whatever the demon had done to him – both the curses and the mental intrusion – had wreaked havoc on his body. He was still struggling to understand how Palo had managed the feat. The demon could have eaten other travelers with dark mana, but that didn't explain how Palo had learned the spells.

Frank vaguely recognized the mental attack from Jason's description of his newly improved *Undead Devotion*, but the implications of that were terrifying. Had the demon trained under a Keeper? Or tortured one until he gave up his secrets? Whatever the answer, Frank never wanted to experience that nightmare again.

"Are you okay?" Silver asked, her voice echoing in the now-silent room. In the time it had taken Frank to recover, she had shifted back to her demi-human form.

Frank wasn't really sure how to answer that.

The demon had forced him to face some of his worst memories – all in an instant. He was left with dozens of questions. How had he managed to put up a fight? Where had that strange, shadowy creature come from? Had that been a figment of his imagination – a representation of his mental defenses? Or something else entirely? It felt almost… *familiar*.

As his eyes focused on Silver's face, he found her glowing sapphire eyes watching him cautiously, which just raised yet another question.

"Why did you save me?" Frank croaked, struggling to rise to his feet. Silver didn't rush to help him, although he noticed her start to step forward before stopping herself.

She arched an eyebrow. "What kind of question is that? I just killed a demon for you," she snapped, a trace of anger coloring her voice.

"Yeah, the same demon that was protecting your town," Frank retorted. "And it's not like you have anything against sacrificing travelers." He hadn't missed the demon's explanation of their *arrangement*.

"You sound like you would rather I let him keep you trapped here and burrow through your memories," Silver said, although her angry gaze was faltering.

"No, I'm definitely glad you stepped in. But I'm asking you

why," Frank said, meeting her gaze. He wouldn't give up on this. It had already been a truly awful day. He'd gotten attacked by mana-draining leeches, trapped in a bunch of ice caves, and then a demon had just gone spelunking in his brain.

He might not be able to answer every question, but he could address *this* one.

The last traces of Silver's anger wilted under his expression, and she had difficulty meeting his eyes. "I-I don't know…"

"Bullshit," Frank said, his patience finally snapping. "Tell me the truth."

Shock now swept across Silver's face as her eyes snapped up to meet his – her fury fanned back to life in an instant by Frank's challenge. Yet she still seemed uncertain how to respond, her eyes drifting across the cave and lingering on the body of the decapitated demon, its rainbow blood still leaking out onto the floor.

"I… I guess I finally caught a glimpse of the demon's true goal," Silver began hesitantly. "We thought we were dealing with some sort of water-mana creature that dwelled in the caves. Our deal seemed reasonable at the time. The travelers don't die – not really. And what was the harm of feeding a beast trapped in a cave?

"However, it's clear that the demon hid his true nature and was using us to build his power. You heard him," Silver said, meeting his eyes for a moment. "He planned to attack the Twilight Throne. Would he have stopped there? Or would his hunger have eventually turned on us after he was too strong for us to defeat?

"Besides, he *used* me," Silver said in a low voice, a growl rumbling from her throat.

Now Frank could understand *that* argument. Silver and her people had already been tricked once by the cultists, and she wouldn't relish a repeat. The consequences of that mistake had been very real for Silver. Even now, Frank could remember Palo's whispered words – the demon had helped the cultists infiltrate Haven. Frank decided not to bring that up. It seemed as though it would only cause Silver more pain.

Still, her explanation felt incomplete. Frank couldn't place why. Faint images and emotions tickled at the edges of his mind, and a telltale glimmer of crimson drifted across Silver's skin. Or maybe he was just imagining it. Maybe it was just body language – the way that Silver avoided looking him in the eye, or seemed to shuffle her feet, kicking at the loose bones that covered the floor of the cave. Either way, something kept nagging at Frank. Something about her explanation didn't feel right.

His gaze lingered on the demon's corpse and the jagged marks that indicated where Silver's fangs had torn Palo's head free from his

body. This could have turned out much differently. Silver had killed the creature easily. Perhaps the demon had been physically frail – which would explain why it relied upon its magics and illusions to trick them. Its spindly, white body certainly looked weak.

But Silver couldn't have been sure of that. She could have left Frank. She could have returned with help, assuming she found a way out of these caverns, of course. Either way, Silver had taken a gamble attacking when she did.

A big one. She had risked her life.

"That isn't the only reason," Frank murmured.

He looked up to find Silver staring at him in surprise, her glowing sapphire eyes wide.

"You took a huge risk attacking the demon. You couldn't have known that you would be able to kill him," Frank said slowly.

He gazed at her evenly. "So why? Why did you save me?"

She looked uncomfortable, her tail drooping as she looked anywhere but at him. "I already told you," she said curtly.

"No, you gave me a half-answer," Frank insisted, taking another few steps toward her until she stood within arm's reach. She backed away slightly – almost like a skittish animal. "Tell me why."

"Fine, it's because I didn't want to see him torture you!" Silver snapped in a low growl, her face flushing. "Are you happy with that? I took a stupid risk to protect an idiot traveler."

Frank froze – shocked by her answer. The silence lengthened and stretched, neither of them certain what to say.

Silver hesitated, meeting his gaze furtively out of the corner of her eye. "You told me to run. I knew right then that if our places were switched, you would have tried to save me – you did the same with the leeches. Even if you almost killed us both. You wouldn't have left.

"So, I… I couldn't just walk away."

Frank merely stared at her. He wasn't certain what answer he had been expecting. Maybe he had underestimated Silver's sense of loyalty, especially when it came to him.

And yet, the only thing he could truly focus on was that he felt grateful. So immensely grateful to this stubborn, angry, beautiful, powerful woman before him. Frank hesitated as that stray thought crossed his mind. He was suddenly intensely aware that Silver was standing only a few scant feet away. The way her ears twitched slightly. The way her tail drooped behind her nervously. The flush on her cheeks. He felt like he could even smell her – although that seemed unlikely with the way the game muted that sense. It was the cold crackle of ice and snow mixed with a note of warm spice that he couldn't place.

He had the sudden urge to step forward and kiss her.

But he resisted.

She didn't see him that way. She couldn't. His mind was already rationalizing her behavior. Why would she feel anything for him? She had just empathized with his pain and felt guilty. That was all. That was the entire foundation of her people's abilities. Silver wasn't interested in him – corrupt, weak, and in need of saving. Her people respected strength and purity. He was nothing more than a freak. She had made that point abundantly clear to him since his arrival in Haven.

"Well, thank you," Frank said weakly, realizing he had gone a long time staring at Silver without saying anything.

She glanced to the side. "It's fine. Just… try to be less stupid. I might not be around to save you next time."

He looked up to see a faint grin curling her lips. "I'll try," Frank said with the ghost of a smile.

"Anyway, you should probably harvest the creature's body," Silver offered, gesturing at the demon's corpse.

"Uh, harvest it?" Frank asked.

Silver let out a frustrated snort. "You likely can't use your… *ability*," Silver offered. "But non-human creatures like this demon typically have salvageable parts that can be used as trophies. These can boost your stats and skills while shifted. Were you not listening to Hoot's explanation?" she demanded, glaring at him again.

"Oh, yeah I remember that I think," Frank offered. He felt strangely comforted by her irritated tone. At least Silver had regained some of her former fire – even if it came at his expense. "Although, it was your kill. Shouldn't you take it?"

Silver grimaced in distaste. "You earned it after what you went through. I have no idea what was going on, but you put up one hell of a fight. That distraction was what let me kill the creature. Besides, I still can't get the taste of this demon out of my mouth. I have no desire to carry any part of it." She shook her head, rolling her tongue in her mouth – disgust painted on her face.

Frank shrugged and pulled a knife from his belt, kneeling beside the demon. However, he was faced with a new problem as he stared down at the corpse.

He wasn't certain how to start. It wasn't like the game came with a demon-skinning instruction manual. Without a plan in mind, he started to slice away gingerly at the creature's skin. He immediately discovered that the pale flesh was incredibly dry. It came away easily in chunks and flakes – like rotten pastry. His fingers alone might have been sufficient to break the demon apart.

Well, no wonder she killed him so easily, he thought. The creature might have been a terrifying mage, but he had been physically frail.

He sliced into the demon's torso, opening its chest cavity. Instead of the organs and blood that he had expected, he found that its chest was filled with the same congealed multi-colored substance. It looked more like liquid mana than actual blood, and he was careful to use the knife's blade to search through the cavity, avoiding contact with his own skin. His single experience touching liquid mana had not been pleasant.

His blade soon stopped on something in the creature's chest.

"There," Silver instructed, hovering over the corpse and watching his progress carefully. "Now feel around it gently."

He did as she instructed, tracing a rough circle around the unknown object. He could feel some resistance, indicating that something was holding the organ in place. So, he made small cuts, neatly severing the unseen bindings. Then he used the flat of the blade to lift the object free. The knife, and whatever rested on its edge, was coated in the sticky, rainbow blood.

Silver pulled a small strip of cloth from her bag and used some thawed ice to clean the knife and its contents. Once they were done, they were left staring at a small crystal the size of a chicken egg. It seemed to suck in the faint light in the cave. As Frank held it in his palm, he could feel a small tug toward the demon's body, as though it was trying to rejoin the corpse – or perhaps swim in the mana-infused blood.

A quick inspection revealed the following.

Demon Heart
This crystal was cut from the chest of an infernal demon. Its hunger is an almost palpable thing, fed by the same demonic cravings of its former master. The gem can be used for many crafting purposes. However, its effects are currently unknown. Caution should be exercised. Demonic artifacts can provide great power but come with an equally great cost.
Quality: A
Effects: Unknown

"Interesting," Frank murmured. "It's not clear what it does though."

"Then hang on to it," Silver said, taking the gem from his palm. She wrapped it in another band of clean cloth before handing it back. "It may be useful one day."

Frank nodded and slipped the cloth into his pocket. Not for the first time, he wished he had his bags and equipment. Maybe he could have those items returned to him once they made it back to Haven.

Although, the thought of the town raised other questions. Like

how the hell they were going to get out of the caves… And would the town now be vulnerable without the demon's protection? They might need to move quickly to warn Haven's council about what had happened here.

"So, what now?" Frank asked.

Silver bit at her lip with her sharp canines, her tail swishing side to side. "Based on what the demon told us, he indicated that he created the leeches. If he's dead now, it's possible that his creations have been destroyed too," Silver said slowly.

"It's also clear that this cavern doesn't connect back to the main canyon," she continued, gesturing at the cave. "Which really just leaves one option."

She met Frank's gaze and then glanced down at his arms meaningfully.

"Damn it," Frank muttered. "You're going to make me dig us out of here, aren't you?"

Silver grinned slightly and patted him on the back. "Ahh, you caught on quick. Maybe you aren't *that* stupid."

"Says the girl that needs me to save her again," Frank grumbled, but he couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips.

"Just think of it as beginning to pay off your blood debt to me," Silver quipped over her shoulder as she headed to the entrance of the cavern. "Come on, slave. Let's get to work!"

Frank chuckled softly as he watched her retreating form. He couldn't help but notice the way her hips swayed as she walked, and his attention wasn't exactly focused on her tail. Once he realized what he was doing, his eyes shot to the side. What the hell was he thinking? If Silver caught him staring at her ass, she might start rethinking her decision to save him and finish what the demon had started.

Besides, this girl wasn't real. He knew that. Didn't he? And either way, she couldn't possibly be interested in *him*. He was still corrupted and an outsider – regardless of whether she might have had a fleeting moment of compassion.

And yet a small, nagging voice spoke up in the back of his mind, reminding him that she had risked everything to save him. What if he had kissed her? What if he hadn't wimped out. Yet again.

Frank let out a sigh.

Maybe I really am an idiot.

Chapter 18 - Recovered

Frank's hand cleared the lip of the ledge, his bare skin scraping against the snow and ice. He dug into the frigid mixture with his fingernails, clawing for purchase before hauling himself over the ridge. He promptly rolled onto his back and lay like that for a moment. Eyes closed and chest heaving, he let the first warm rays of sunshine he had seen in days drift across his face.

True to her word, Silver had put him to work to clear the ice leading back into the underground canyon. His *Bear Form* had helped – the combination of his natural claws and enhanced strength let him slice blocks of ice free and then toss them back down the tunnel – although the process had still taken hours. Frank had dug until his arms burned and had kept going until it felt like lava was flowing through his veins.

He only slightly regretted Silver saving him by the time they were finished.

The one positive was that the intense work had earned him a system notice once he had cleared the ice.

Stat Increases:

+47 Strength
+42 Endurance

When they had finally made it back into the canyon, they discovered that the leeches had vanished. Perhaps they had crawled back into their nests, or they were dead or dormant now that their master was dead.

Something kicked at Frank's side, and he opened his eyes, blinking against the bright sunlight. He could see Silver's form standing over him. "You dead? Seems like a shame to die on your back in the snow after everything we've been through."

Frank let out a tired huff. "Not quite yet." He pushed himself to a sitting position, eyeing the snow-covered peaks that loomed around them.

The perpetual, swirling icy wind had given way to an almost eerie peace. Bright sunlight now reflected off the powdery snow,

creating a scene of blinding white. Frank could finally see how deep into the mountains they had traveled. Below them rested frigid valleys and canyons as far as the eye could see.

"It's beautiful," Frank murmured, drinking in the sight.

He glanced to the side to see Silver observing that same view, but while his gaze had been filled with wonder, her eyes were clouded with concern and a trace of guilt. For her, the suddenly sunny weather conveyed a different message.

"I…" Frank began but was cut off as a piercing whistle echoed through the air.

Silver's furry ears perked up, and she looked off to the side. Then she placed her fingers to her lips and gave an answering whistle.

A dozen or so yards away, a snow-covered mound shuddered, blankets of white powder shifting and falling away. Frank lurched to his feet, expecting another attack, but paused when he saw that Silver didn't seem alarmed.

A hand broke through the snow, followed closely by Howl's surly face. The man spared a moment to glare at the pair before using his hands to dig at the snow and ice that had accumulated against what Frank could only surmise was a makeshift shelter.

"Well, hello there, strangers!" another voice called from behind them.

Frank whirled to find Hoot approaching through the snow, his ivory furs allowing him to blend in easily. The thin man would have been nearly invisible if he hadn't been moving. Archie was currently nowhere to be seen, but Frank expected that if he searched the skies, he might be able to catch a white speck signaling the owl's presence far overhead.

"We were… delayed," Silver said, grimacing slightly and sparing a glance at Frank.

"That's the understatement of the year," Runner grumbled as he emerged from the shelter before reaching behind him and helping to pull Spider out of the snowbank. The quiet man gave Frank a curt nod as their eyes met.

"What the hell took you so long?" Howl demanded as he approached the edge of the hole. "We've been waiting for nearly two days now."

"Plenty of time for you to complete your rounds," Silver said, eyeing the man skeptically.

"Speaking of which, all is clear on the eastern front," Hoot said as he approached. He clapped Frank on the back. "So, how is our newest recruit? You master the art of the *shift* down there in that frigid death hole?"

"Not exactly," Frank replied with a grimace of his own.

"I'm surprised you aren't dead," Runner said curtly, sparing a quick glance at Frank. Then he looked at Silver meaningfully. The others were also watching her carefully. "We were *all* expecting to be one member short on the trek back."

Silver looked away. "Well, things changed."

Frank watched this exchange, his brow furrowed in confusion. Then he glanced at Spider and Hoot, noticing the way they wouldn't quite look at him. They looked guilty. Even Howl and Runner were suddenly busy checking their gear.

"Wait," Frank began slowly. "Did you all think I was going to die down there?"

"Uh, let's just say that the odds were not in your favor," Hoot said, kicking at the snow.

"What he means is that we expected you to get eaten by a giant, mangy cave Beast," Howl muttered. "Didn't love the idea, but it would have saved us another trip out here in a few weeks and rid us of a possible spy."

Frank whirled on Silver. "What the hell! You were planning to feed me to that demon?" She was suddenly much more interested in their surroundings.

"Demon?" the others echoed in surprise.

"What's going on, Silver?" Hoot asked. "We couldn't help but notice that our boy here is still breathing, and it is just a *gorgeous* day. Actually, it's way too nice, if you catch my drift."

Silver looked at the group, noting the way everyone was staring at her, waiting for her to answer their questions. This included Frank.

She had planned to feed me to that demon?

Suddenly, several things finally snapped into place in Frank's head. Silver hadn't hoped to put him through some sort of training gauntlet. She had been planning to get rid of him and feed her pet Beast at the same time. He could only assume the others must have had some second thoughts before they entered the Chasm… which would explain that awkward conversation before they had pushed him over the ledge. They had basically left it up to Silver to decide whether to sacrifice him by forcing her to go with him.

Just a short few days ago in-game, this wouldn't have surprised him. Silver hadn't exactly been shy about her desire to see him dead, but after everything that they had just been through, it stung far more than he would have expected. It felt like a betrayal – even if some rational part of his brain kept insisting that Silver didn't owe him shit and probably saw him as a threat to her family and her people.

Silver finally met his gaze, and he saw pain and hesitation in her eyes.

"You were planning to sacrifice me, weren't you?" Frank asked.

"Okay… yes. Maybe," Silver replied uncertainly. "That was certainly a *possibility*."

"With the odds at about 99%," Howl muttered under his breath. Runner nodded in agreement.

"Shut it," Silver snapped at them. "You two didn't say shit when Hoot and Spider got cold feet. Or did you think I'd forgotten that?" The two Shifters glanced aside, not quite able to meet her gaze.

Silver shifted her attention back to Frank. "But I changed my mind," she continued. "For all the reasons I already explained down in that hole. Remember, I did kill that demon to save you," she added forcefully.

Frank had to admit that Silver had saved him – technically, twice. But he also hadn't realized that the only reason they had climbed down into that deathtrap in the first place was so that she could sacrifice him.

Frank looked away, feeling conflicted. Why was he so irritated, and why the hell did this hurt so damn much? Should he have really expected anything different? He could still feel Silver's eyes on him, but he didn't look up.

"I don't want to interrupt this little moment or whatever, but maybe you could explain to the rest of the class what you mean by the *demon* part. Maybe also the *killing* part," Hoot interjected, raising his hand as he looked between Frank and Silver in confusion.

Silver let out a short sigh. "Okay, the Beast we were sacrificing travelers to turned out to be an ancient demon that had been exiled to the caves by a group of gods. He was using an illusion to trick us into bringing him travelers, which he was then eating to feed on their mana and grow his own power so that he could leave the mountains and carve a path of destruction through the lands around us.

"We sort of accidentally caved in the underground canyon and stumbled into the demon's lair. He revealed his true nature. He tortured Frank, and I…uh… well, I bit his head off," Silver said, ending weakly as she eyed the rest of the group.

This all came out in a rush, and the members of the hunting pack were left staring at their leader in shock.

"I think… I think I speak for us all when I say that this is a bit to digest," Hoot offered. Then he nudged Frank with his elbow. "Get it, *digest*. Because demons apparently eat people…"

Frank could only stare at the slender man. "Really? It's too damn soon."

Hoot just shrugged and grinned at him.

"Wait, so does that explain the sudden improvement in the weather?" Howl asked, pointing up at the now nearly cloudless sky.

"Yes," Silver said curtly.

“And so, Haven’s protections are—” Runner began, sudden realization dawning in his eyes.

“Likely gone now,” Silver finished for him.

Another long silence lingered in the air as the group processed this bombshell.

“What the flying fuck were you thinking?” Howl demanded, rounding on Silver and stabbing a finger at her. “You killed the demon instead of letting him eat this worthless idiot?” he asked, waving a hand at Frank. “He can’t even *shift*!

“Hell, it was your plan to sacrifice him! And yet you put everyone and everything at risk over some boy? You are supposed to be our pack leader, not some blushing schoolgirl!”

Silver’s eyes flared in anger. In a flash of movement, she grabbed Howl’s finger, bending it backward until Frank heard the bone crunch. She leaned forward, a low growl vibrating her throat. “I am still *Alpha* here. You will watch your gods-damned tongue.”

She let Howl go, and he stepped back quickly, nursing his finger and glaring at Silver.

“Now. If you will let me finish…” she said, eyeing the rest of the group. They all gave curt nods, no one else moving an inch as they cast furtive glances at Howl.

“We were left with little choice,” Silver began. “The demon might have been protecting Haven for now, but what was going to happen when he grew in power? What was to stop him from using us as a snack on his way out of the mountains?”

She met Howl’s gaze. “Do you really find comfort in feeding a beast that will likely turn on you for dessert?”

Frank knew that the demon had done much more than that, but he hesitated to offer that information – a kernel of anger still burning in his chest over what Silver had done. Or, at least, what she had planned to do. However, as he saw the fear and anger in the eyes of the other pack members, he could finally understand the real risk that Silver had taken for him. He could see the unspoken accusation in their eyes.

They still felt Silver had betrayed them. For him. A traveler.

“That wasn’t all,” Frank offered, stepping forward. He spared a glance at Silver, noting the surprise in her eyes – and some emotion he couldn’t quite place. “You didn’t hear him, but the demon taunted me as he tortured me,” Frank said to Silver.

“The demon claimed that he helped the cultists infiltrate Haven. After they stole your knowledge, he used your fear and anger to convince you to take his deal,” Frank said softly.

“You didn’t… you never told me that,” Silver said, that same strange emotion in her eyes mixing with the pain and anger that he

saw there.

"And you didn't tell me you planned to sacrifice me to a demon," Frank retorted in a dry voice. "That wasn't exactly the *spirit* of your father's instructions, by the way." This earned him a wince from Silver.

"He sort of has you there," Hoot offered, nodding along. "Point, Frank!" The man was drawing lines in the snow, presumably keeping score of their ongoing argument.

"Okay, fine," Howl gritted out. With a swift jerk, he popped his finger back into place, grimacing slightly. However, the anger hadn't faded from his eyes. "Let's say you are both telling the truth. What now?"

Runner nodded. "Haven is defenseless." He glanced at Silver. "It isn't just the ice blocking the entrance to the valley. You know as well as I do that the weather was keeping the travelers at bay. And we have sacrificed many of his kind to the demon," he added, waving at Frank. "They may not be happy."

Silver rubbed at her eyes, letting out a frustrated sigh. "I know," she murmured, before looking back at the group. "But there is no changing what has already been done. We need to get back to Haven and warn the council – warn everyone."

"It will take us at least two days," Hoot offered, looking at the sky. "And we only have a few more hours of daylight left. We will need to take shelter soon. It is still too cold at night, even for us."

"Then we head back to the cave," Silver said. "If we hurry, we should be able to make it back there shortly after dark. Then we might make it back to Haven by tomorrow."

The group all nodded, and they started preparing their equipment, hefting their packs and cleaning up the stray tracks around the mouth of the hole down into Chasm. Silver spared one last conflicted glance at Frank before heading off to help them, leaving him standing there alone with his thoughts swirling.

He felt someone place a gentle hand on his shoulder and turned to see Spider looking at him intently. The man hadn't spoken a single word during the exchange.

The Grower glanced at Silver's back where she stood, talking to Howl and Runner. Then he looked back at Frank, before leaning in close and whispering a few short words in Frank's ear – his voice practically inaudible even with his mouth hovering only centimeters away. Yet Frank saw Silver's ears twitch slightly and the way she glanced furtively in their direction. Her brow furrowed uncertainly. Then Spider turned on his heel and simply walked off.

Frank could only stare after him in shock, not sure he had understood the man's words – or perhaps not sure he believed them.

Yet he wasn't given long to dwell on it.

"Let's get this show on the road!" Hoot shouted, his voice echoing over the mountaintop. His cry was answered by a piercing shriek from far above them as the group started the long trek back to Haven.

Chapter 19 - Confused

"Hey, are you alright?"

Frank looked up to find his mother staring at him from the other side of their kitchen table, her fork half raised in front of her. His father was sitting beside her, looking at an image projected along the table beside him. He shot them both an inquiring glance as though he was uncertain if his wife had been talking to him.

"Uh, yeah, I guess," Frank said, pushing the eggs around his plate.

After the group had made it to the cave the night before, he had logged off. He had promptly crashed into bed face first and immediately passed out. The next morning, he had splashed some water on his face and gone downstairs to grab something to eat – his stomach reminding him rather insistently that it needed some attention.

Which was how he had accidentally gotten roped into eating breakfast with his parents. No amount of begging or pleading had helped. To be fair to them, Saturday morning was typically a time that they all sat down to breakfast together – or at least it used to be. They rarely observed the ritual anymore as he and his siblings had grown older.

"You seem like you're somewhere else?" his mother prompted.

Frank just shrugged and shoved some food into his mouth to buy himself some time. "Thinking about AO, that's all," he mumbled as he chewed.

"Speaking of *somewhere* else, where is Rebecca?" his father asked, glancing at the empty chair nearby.

"I'm not sure. She said something about hanging out with friends on her way out the door this morning," Frank's mother answered.

Then she turned her attention to Frank. "Did she say anything about her art fair? We didn't get back from work until late, and Rebecca seemed to be asleep already."

Frank grimaced and nearly bit his tongue. He could still vividly recall his sister's angry expression and her cutting words. He had no idea how her stupid fair had gone, and he wasn't sure he cared. But he managed to rein in his anger before answering.

"No idea," he offered with a shrug. "You'll have to ask her."

"I'm sure she did fine," his dad said, his gaze already back on the screen. Frank could only assume he was working or reading emails

– which would be pretty much par for the course. His father was perpetually checked out.

Frank swallowed another bite, his own thoughts drifting. He had had the most intense dreams the night before. Normally, the memory of his dreams tended to evaporate as he woke up, the colors and images bleeding away until they were little more than a fuzzy combination of feelings. However, this time had been different. His dreams were vivid static images that seemed to have been burned into his retinas. They returned immediately when he closed his eyes, almost as though they were taunting him.

He had dreamed of frigid snow, of swirling rainbow-colored eyes, of hallways that seemed to shift and move and doors that slammed open on uncomfortable memories. He had dreamed of the phantom creature, all shadowy claws and primal rage. However, the most distinct memory was of Silver's face, her glowing blue eyes staring at him with a strange emotion he couldn't identify and her white-silver ears framing her face. The phantom creature had stilled itself then, staring in rapt attention with Frank's dream self.

He just couldn't stop thinking about her.

What was it about that stupid, irritating, stubborn woman? She wasn't even real! And she had tried to kill him! She was just another NPC – a talking, digital counter for loot and quests. Yet even as he tried to convince himself of that, the argument landed flat. Silver was much more nuanced than anyone he had ever met in a game before. Hell, she was more complicated than most *people* he had met.

Besides, he knew he was just trying to avoid examining his feelings – trying to push her away and minimize what she was to him.

He froze at thought.

What exactly *was* she to him?

Just the question implied that he cared about Silver more than he should about a digital girl. It made him feel stupid. Even more stupid than he had at the way Spider's whispered words had made his stomach lurch. He still didn't want to consider what the nearly mute Grower had meant. Had he been trying to give advice? Mess with him?

Frank shook his head. It almost didn't matter.

The question was how the hell did he feel about Silver? He couldn't decide whether he was angry or disappointed. Intrigued or upset. She glared at him one moment, saved him the next, and capped it all off by revealing her intention to sacrifice him to a demon. Then there was the way she had looked at him…

She was just so damned frustrating!

Frank growled under his breath without thinking, pushing at his food more violently than he intended. His fork rattled against the

plate as it dropped from his fumbling fingers.

"Are you alright?" his mother asked for the second time. Even his father was staring at him now, concern and confusion warring for dominance in his eyes.

Which only made Frank feel even more stupid and frustrated.

"No," he finally blurted. "No, I'm not alright."

"Oh, okay," his mother replied calmly, setting down her fork. They were both looking at him now. Waiting.

It felt strange to have them both actually listen to him. At first, he almost wasn't certain what he wanted to say.

"This probably sounds stupid," he muttered. "But I met this person the other day."

"A *female* person?" His father raised an eyebrow.

Frank was staring at his plate now. "Yes. Or no. Actually, it doesn't matter," Frank said, feeling confused.

His mother rested a hand on his father's shoulder, quieting his next question. "What seems to be the problem?"

Frank had been struggling with that same question.

"I'm not sure," he replied slowly. "I guess I just don't know how I feel about her. She is frustrating, stubborn, confusing…" He trailed off, feeling like he couldn't quite convey what he was trying to say.

He looked up, expecting to find the typical judgment in his parents' eyes. Instead, he found the same look plastered on both of their faces. It was a sort of sympathetic understanding.

"You like her," his father said shortly. His mother nodded.

Frank could only stare at them. Did he?

He supposed he felt *something*. But did he like Silver? Like *that*?

That just opened a rabbit hole of other questions that flitted through his brain too fast for Frank to truly process. How could he like an NPC? And was that really the answer? Could he want to hug someone and throttle them at the same time? Was there something wrong with him? And then his thoughts settled on a final question.

How did Silver feel about him?

Frank recoiled from that question, closing his eyes. He was a traveler. Corrupted. Fat. Stupid. A failure. An outsider. Responsible for endangering her village – if only indirectly. She would never return his *feelings*.

And there it was. The answer was staring him in the face.

"Shit," Frank muttered.

"Hey, it happens whether you like it or not," his father said. He glanced at Frank's mother. "We don't always get to decide how we feel."

She placed her hand on his. "And our feelings don't always make sense. Hate and love are two sides of the same coin. For

everything I love about your father, there are still parts that infuriate me."

His mother looked pointedly at the screen still projected along the table. "Like reading emails at the table."

A rueful grin curled his father's lips. "Hey, focus on the boy."

It was his mother's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Anyway," she continued, glancing back at Frank. "If you feel this way, then you should tell her."

Frank gulped involuntarily.

"A ball buster, huh?" his father said, laughing at Frank's reaction. "Well, find a way to tell her then – in your own way. Take a chance. Otherwise, you're probably going to regret it later. You miss 100% of the shots you never take."

Frank just sat in silence. Tell Silver that he might have feelings for her? He could barely admit that to himself. It was just impossible.

"So, who is this girl?" his mother asked, leaning forward and a curious twinkle shining in her eyes.

"Uh, just someone I met in-game," Frank said without thinking.

"See, I told you the game has been a good influence," Frank's father said with a smile.

"Did I mention that being a know-it-all is also on my list of grievances?" his mother teased.

"I'll make a note."

"Uh, I think I'm done with breakfast. Thanks for the advice, though," Frank said, interrupting his parents' banter.

"Alright," his mother said. "Just be yourself. I'm sure it will be fine."

"Good luck," his father called as Frank left the room, carrying his plate.

Neither parting remark made him feel any better.

Frank set his plate down in the sink, watching water spray across its surface and droplets accumulate along the metallic sides of the basin.

He shook his head. He couldn't answer any of these questions, and his feelings were just confusing and messy. So, Frank would do what he did best, push those feelings deep, deep down where they couldn't get in his way.

Because he would still need to log in. He would still need to confront Silver again. And he would still need to clean up the mess that his arrival in Haven had created.

He just hoped that it would be simple.

He could really use a straightforward problem right now.

Chapter 20 - Apprehensive

Frank blinked at the sudden transition. A moment before, he had lain down on his bed, placing the VR equipment over his head. Now he was lying in a cave, ice lining the walls. The glowing embers of what had once been a fire rested in the center of the cave, small tendrils of smoke rising into the air.

The team's equipment was conspicuously missing, and the members of the hunting pack were nowhere to be seen.

Frank quickly rose, checking his own meager equipment and once again bemoaning the loss of his axes and bags. Maybe he could remedy that problem when they got back to town. There was a limit to what he could carry in his pockets.

Speaking of which, his hand hovered over the small lump in his pocket. He knew a malignant crystal rested in those folds of cloth – a demon's heart. He still wasn't sure what he planned to do with it – or what he really *could* do with it. He had a feeling that the crystal's cost would far exceed its benefits.

For now, he had larger problems. His eyes shifted to the leather sheet that obscured the entrance. Had the group simply left him here? He wasn't sure he could blame them if they had. Even now, he could visualize Howl's and Runner's shocked expressions. What he and Silver had done had potentially endangered their people.

Letting out a soft sigh, the vapor billowing in the frigid mountain air, Frank pushed aside the leather flap hanging over the entrance to the cave. Powdery snow fell to the ground in clumps, and he held up a hand to ward off the bright sunlight that suddenly penetrated the cave.

The area outside the cavern had experienced a transformation. Frank hadn't been able to appreciate the beauty of the mountains while freezing to death in a magical blizzard. But now he had a chance to take in the ivory peaks that loomed around him and the way the snow clung to the ground, reflecting the sunlight and practically glowing.

"Finally," a voice spoke up. Hoot hopped down from his perch above the entrance to the cave and slapped him on the back. "We've been waiting on you for ages."

They were interrupted as two wolves – one large and brown and the other a brilliant white, streaked with lines of silver – came loping through the trees. They transformed without stopping, Howl and Silver reassuming their human shape.

Frank heard another thump and whirled. He found himself staring into the feline eyes of a snow leopard. It was perched above the cave, watching him. As he stared, the mountain cat transformed, leaving Runner sitting atop the cave with an eyebrow raised. Lastly, Spider drifted to the ground behind him, lowered by a tree branch. The nearly mute man patted the tree's trunk before joining the group.

They had waited for him.

"Damn, he's back," Howl said from behind Frank – although he sounded more disappointed than excited by that fact.

"I was just saying the same thing!" Hoot said with a grin.

Frank tentatively met Silver's sapphire eyes, and both of them looked away at the same time. "What now?" Frank asked, trying to ignore the sick feeling in his stomach and his confused thoughts. Maybe he could distract himself by focusing on the task at hand.

"We need to travel back to Haven," Silver replied. "We have been scouting while you were gone and haven't seen any signs of travelers."

"For now," Runner grunted.

"For now," Silver echoed with a nod.

"However, we need to hurry," she added, a worried look on her face. "The sooner we let the council know what happened, the sooner we can send out additional scouts. We need to be more careful now that the demon's protections have lapsed."

"Well, let's get moving then!" Frank said, gesturing to the west.

The group nodded and started off in that direction, Frank walking with Hoot and trying not to roll his eyes as the man jabbered at him.

Frank missed the way Silver lingered beside the cave entrance, her glowing eyes focused on his back – and the confusion that lingered in her gaze. After a long pause, she shook her head and set off after them, gritting her teeth and muttering under her breath.

* * *

A few hours later, the group was spread out in a line, taking a winding path through the mountain, but heading ever westward. Frank had to admit that the walk back had been far more pleasant than his initial journey, although he could feel the group's nervousness in the tense silence that frequently hung in the air. With the exception of Hoot, they spoke in clipped sentences, giving one or two word answers to any question he posed.

They were worried.

Frank could understand why. He had also noticed the way the snow and ice had begun to recede as they walked. The white landscape now gave way to verdant green trees, and a few bushes had even begun to peek through the snow. It seemed that the mountains were starting to settle back into their natural rhythm, life emerging from the ice and snow once again.

A whistle went up from the group's rear – a signal for danger. They moved quickly, blending into a nearby snowdrift and gathering closer together, keeping their movements slow and inconspicuous.

As they grouped together under an overhang of ice and snow, Silver looked to Hoot. "What is it?" she asked quietly.

"Archie saw something up ahead," Hoot answered, his eyes on the sky. Far, far overhead, Frank could just barely make out a white speck against the blue sky. Hoot's typically jovial face was scrunched up in worry, his gaze distant as though focused on something else.

"What do you see?" Howl asked.

Hoot grimaced. "The snows have cleared from the pass that runs through the mountains," he said slowly, as though trying to interpret whatever he was seeing. "Green trees and even grass are visible. I sense prey now, warm and scurrying."

"Focus," Silver said, resting a hand on Hoot's shoulder.

He tilted his head – the gesture strangely owl-like. "The ice blocking the entrance to the valley has melted away, leaving only rough stone. Creatures linger there, scaring the prey away. They stand tall and many. They cut down the trees and make fire."

Hoot suddenly shook his head, his eyes refocusing on the group.

"Shit," the Tamer muttered. "There are travelers building a small encampment at the entrance to the valley."

The group sat in silence for a minute, digesting that news.

"How many?" Silver asked.

Hoot grimaced and rubbed at his eyes. "You know Archie is bad with numbers. Owls just understand 'prey' and 'no prey.' So, it's somewhere between one and a lot," he bit out with a grim chuckle.

Silver glanced at Spider. "Can you learn more?"

The man simply shook his head. "There are few trees or plants nearby."

"Of course not. They are using them to build a camp," Howl groused, looking at Runner. The two shared a knowing look, their skin both glimmering with a multi-colored glow as they fidgeted anxiously. They looked ready for a fight.

Frank had pieced together that Hoot had viewed the pass through Archie's eyes, one of his abilities as a Tamer. And Spider must be able to use plants to sense the presence of other creatures. He was

past questioning the details of their talents at this point. Although, he had to admit that those two abilities were crazy useful when it came to scouting.

"But why?" Frank asked. "Why set up a camp outside the valley?"

Silver grimaced. "There is an ancient road that runs through the mountains and passes in front of the entrance to our valley. This was once used by travelers and residents of this world to move goods through the mountains." She let the implication hang in the air.

"You think they are just merchants?" Frank asked. Silver gave an uncertain shrug.

"They didn't seem like they were here to trade," Hoot added. "Or they were the best-armed merchants I've seen in a while. Archie caught the glint of metal more than once – it was distracting. That and the campfires were what gave them away."

"So, what now?" Howl asked, looking at Silver.

"We could move closer and get a better sense of their numbers," she offered. "Then we could consider a plan of attack. I'd rather wipe them out before they try to venture into the valley. Better safe than sorry."

The others nodded slowly.

Frank felt like that was the wrong move. This didn't feel like a coincidence. The timing was too on the nose. Why would players set up a camp in the middle of the mountains? And it just happened to be next to the entrance to the valley? And right after they had cleared the weather and the ice? It didn't sit right with him. Even if they managed to attack them, the players could simply respawn and come back. The trouble was that they didn't know *why* they were there.

He could practically hear Jason whispering in his ear. He knew exactly what his friend would do in this situation. They needed more information.

"I have another idea," Frank offered, looking at the group. "But you probably aren't going to like it."

"Oh, I'm sure this will be good," Howl offered sarcastically. His eyes gleamed with bloodlust. "We shouldn't sit and wait. We should be moving. I can already taste traveler blood on the air."

Silver gave Frank a more measured look, as though weighing his words. "What is it?" she asked simply.

"While I understand your dislike of the travelers," Frank offered, glancing at Howl and Runner, "the truth is that killing us is only a temporary fix. Those men and women will simply come back. They will also learn more about you even as they die at your hand. We need to understand *why* they are here and learn more about them."

Howl grimaced – a ready retort already on his lips, but he bit his tongue when Silver glared at him.

"Okay, what do you suggest instead?" Hoot asked, curiosity shining in his eyes.

Frank took a deep breath. "Let me talk to them."

He continued quickly. "I can disable my guild tag and act like I'm a traveler who has been waylaid along the road. I might be able to learn why they are here and what they are planning to do. After that, you all can kill them if you want," he added for Howl and Runner's benefit.

"Or you could simply run off with your own kind," Howl growled. "How can we trust you not to betray us and simply help these travelers raid Haven?" This earned an affirmative grunt from Runner, who was eyeing Frank skeptically. Hoot and Spider appeared undecided, weighing Frank's words carefully.

Frank met Howl's gaze squarely, feeling a dull ember of anger burn in his chest. "What would I gain from betraying you? Have I learned the *shift* yet? I still need your people's help."

Howl barked out a harsh laugh, stepping toward Frank. "So, your argument is you still need to use us for your own purpose? And what if the travelers make you a better offer?"

Frank didn't back down, approaching Howl until the two men stood only a foot or two apart. "And you let your own bias and fear cloud your judgment," Frank retorted, his own anger rising. "Will you not listen to reason? Or are you simply an animal?"

Howl snarled at him, his body flickering erratically as though he was struggling to hold back his *shift*. "I don't need to take this from a corrupted outsider. You are not even pack!"

"Enough!" Silver interjected harshly, glaring at them. "I am Alpha here, and I will decide." She looked at Howl and then at Frank. "Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," Frank said, taking a step back but keeping his eyes on Howl.

Howl looked at Silver for a moment as though trying to decide whether he wanted to follow her orders. She had clearly lost standing after her actions in the Chasm. "Yes," Howl finally muttered, and he paced back to Runner.

"With all of that drama out of the way, how shall we proceed?" Hoot asked, unperturbed by the posturing among the Shifters.

Silver weighed the decision, rubbing at her eyes with one hand. When she looked up again, she met Frank's eyes evenly. "Can we trust you?" Silver asked him.

Frank sensed a deeper question there. For just a fraction of a second, he detected a telltale red glow envelop Silver's face and faint

images flickered through his mind's eye. Although, they were so fleeting that he couldn't make any sense of them.

"Yes," Frank said firmly. "You can trust me."

Silver's gaze wavered for a second at his wording.

Then she seemed to come to a decision and glanced at the rest of the group. "So be it. We will send Frank to talk to these travelers."

Silver looked at Frank from head to toe, sizing him up. He was healthy, his furs intact despite the perils they had endured in the Chasm. He looked too strong, too well kept. "We will need to make his story look authentic," Silver murmured. "He was waylaid and beaten by other travelers, after all."

She waved at Howl. "Get to work."

Howl's predatory grin widened as he stalked forward. Frank could feel a heavy weight settle in his stomach. Yet he didn't protest or give up any ground as the Shifter approached, cracking his knuckles and a manic gleam shining in his eyes. Frank had asked for this. And it was worth it – he kept reminding himself of that. He could endure this if it meant learning how to *shift* and finding a way to protect Haven.

Yet a part of him knew that he was doing this for another reason – a less practical one.

Even as the first blow landed, Frank's attention was focused solely on Silver and her shining blue eyes. Which was how he saw her flinch slightly as the first blow landed.

Chapter 21 - Sympathetic

Frank shuffled down the road, not really needing to fake the limp. The blood – his blood – that now stained his ripped and torn furs was also authentic. Well, as authentic as digital blood could be, Frank supposed. He wasn't exactly in a philosophical mood right now.

Howl had taken great joy in painting a very realistic picture of a waylaid traveler, and Frank had been his willing canvas. The beating seemed to last for a long time, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. Even without *shifting*, Howl's natural strength had been more than enough to beat him to a pulp. It had taken most of Frank's considerable willpower to sit through it.

He winced as he put some weight on his bad leg. His natural health regeneration would fix the injury eventually, but for now, he had to live with it.

Fucking Howl. He wasn't sure how yet, but he planned to get even eventually.

To make matters worse, the group had dropped him off about a mile from the player encampment. They wanted to make certain that any scouts that the players had left would be able to see Frank coming. It was all about making his story plausible, after all.

As though taunting him, the game had also rewarded his masochistic efforts.

> **New Passive Skill: Disguise**
> While far from an expert in the art of concealment, you have demonstrated that you are willing to go above and beyond to achieve an authentic disguise. Hell, most method actors would envy your pain tolerance. You are either strangely committed, insane, or pining after a fiery, blue-eyed Shifter. At least your epitaph will read that you were a *romantic* idiot.
> **Skill Level:** Beginner Level 1
> **Effect:** 5% increased authenticity to your costumes and mannerisms while disguised.

Frank swept away the screen, grunting in irritation. Fantastic. Even the game was mocking him now. Although he couldn't really disagree with its conclusion.

He really was an idiot.

Frank rounded a bend in the trail with his shuffling gait and

finally came into view of the player encampment ahead. It was merely a clearing off the side of the trail, the nearby trees having been felled to create rough-hewn benches. The smoke of the fires drifted above the camp, signaling to anyone in the area that people were nearby.

They are being careless.

Even as that thought crossed his mind, a bolt of searing flame suddenly rocketed toward him. Frank barely manage to stumble out of the way in time, yet the fire still singed part of his fur – leaving a black trail and a muted, sickly, burnt smell.

Damn it. His once-proud furs were basically nothing more than rags now.

Frank lifted his hands, showing his empty palms. “Hey, I’m just a player!” he shouted. “Please don’t shoot!”

He could see two players sitting on a large rock to the side of the trail. Flames curled around one’s wand as he glanced at Frank skeptically. His teammate was robed in simple leathers, something that looked like a bow slung across his back. He made no move to reach for his weapon as he saw Frank’s terrible state.

“You look like shit,” the mage shouted back.

No kidding.

“I got attacked by some people back down the road,” Frank explained, waving at the trail behind him. “Not sure if they were NPCs or players.”

The two men looked at each other for a moment. “How did they attack you? Could they shapeshift? Manipulate plants? Did they have pets?” the mage asked.

Hmm, they know about the residents of Haven then. He supposed he could play along. Frank decided to alter his story a little bit. He had been prepared to blame other players, but this seemed like a better direction.

“Now that you mention it, they did bind me with plants while they stole my stuff,” Frank said slowly, as though struggling to remember what happened. “Although, it’s kind of fuzzy.”

Technically, that’s not even a lie. Frank could still remember how Silver and her hunting pack had initially kidnapped him.

The two men relaxed slightly and whispered to each other for a moment. Frank knew that the other members of the pack were lurking in the area and Hoot probably had eyes on him. If these two idiots didn’t let him inside the camp, he expected some blood was likely to stain the lingering pockets of snow along the trail soon.

He breathed out a sigh of relief as the mage waved for him to come forward. Frank obliged with shambling steps.

As he neared, the mage hopped down from the rock and stuck out a hand. “Sorry about trying to blast you,” the man said. “The

name's James, and this guy here is Harper."

As Frank looked over at the other man, he realized he had been wrong. What he had assumed was a bow was really a lute, a leather strap holding the instrument tight to his back.

"You're a bard? Really?" Frank asked, shaking his head.

Harper scowled at him. "A little biased, aren't we? Got something against bards?"

Frank shrugged. "Hey, man, you do you. Fantasy rockstar buffbot all the way."

"That's a lot of judgment coming from the guy that looks like the forest beat the ever-living shit out of him," Harper pointed out dryly.

"Okay, that's fair," Frank said with a chuckle, holding up his hands in a conciliatory fashion.

Frank eyed them both. "So, what has you so trigger happy? Is there a group of PKers in the area or something? Maybe the same people who stole my stuff?"

The two looked at each other. "Something like that, I guess," James said. "Why don't you come on into camp, and we'll let you talk to Liam. He'll probably want to question you about what happened." He snaked a hand into his pack. "Oh, and this might help."

Frank caught the object before it smashed against the ground. It was a small glowing red vial. On one side, a logo was painted on the glass, a familiar "AE." He supposed it was good to see Jason's manufacturing plan working, but Frank wasn't exactly in the right state of mind to appreciate the irony of being handed one of Eliza's potions.

He pulled the stopper and downed the potion's contents.

"Thanks," Frank said, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. His leg and bruises immediately began to heal. He tested his knee experimentally and let out a relieved sigh when he was able to put his full weight on the leg again.

"Don't mention it," James said.

The pair then led Frank farther into the camp. Frank took the opportunity to examine their setup more closely. It was a typical player encampment – meaning that they didn't invest much time in luxuries like sleeping areas or latrines. What was the point when you could just log out? He also didn't see very many players. Maybe a dozen or so working to clear and set up the camp. Those were pretty modest numbers compared to the size of Haven. Maybe these people didn't really understand what they were dealing with.

The players had chopped down a bunch of trees, creating a small clearing lined with crude workbenches. Frank saw leatherworking materials and tools riddling one bench and what

looked like the beginning of a mobile forge along one side of the camp. In short, they were setting up crafting areas. Likely, to build and repair equipment. Frank had seen a similar setup a long time ago when he, Jason, and Riley had gotten trapped in the dungeon north of Peccavi.

Frank could feel a weight settle in his stomach at this realization, his momentary relief vanishing quickly.

That wasn't good. That wasn't good at all.

James and Harper made a beeline for a lone tent near the center of the camp. As they neared it, James rapped his knuckles against one of the wooden beams holding up the structure and then stepped inside, Frank and Harper on his heels.

Inside, Frank found a rather spacious area. A table had been set in the center of the tent, scrolls and hastily scrawled maps riddling its surface. Standing over the table was an older man wearing thick chainmail and a longsword dangling at his waist. His hair was cropped short and graying, and a thick beard sprouted from his chin.

Frank had to do a double take. It was weird to meet an older player. Most other people he met in-game were in their teens or twenties.

The man looked up, noting Harper and James before his eyes settled on Frank's haggard form, looking him up and down and appraising his makeshift, bloodied furs and lack of weapons. Frank saw intelligence there and a careful, meticulous attention to detail.

Another bad sign.

"We found this guy wandering into the camp. Says he was waylaid – sounds like it was the same group of druids we've been hunting," Harper offered. "So, we thought we'd bring him to you."

"Good call," the older man answered. He approached Frank and offered a hand. "Hi there. The name's Liam, and I'm the guild leader of the Knights of the New Republic," he said, waving at the tent.

"Nice to meet you," Frank said, taking his hand. "Interesting guild name. Are you guys fans of the old MMO or something?"

Liam's face broke into a wide smile. "Ahh, we've found a *real* gamer. I was afraid it showed my age. So, you're a fan of the classics, huh?"

Who would have thought my arcane nerd knowledge would come in handy one day? Maybe all those hours spent in front of a screen hadn't been entirely wasted.

"Definitely," Frank answered with a grin of his own. "There are a couple private servers that are still fun to play on. Plus, you can avoid the grind a little with faster experience and drop rates."

Liam grimaced. "One advantage of this brave new digital world, I guess. A lot less mindless hack-and-slash and farming.

Although, I guess we replaced some of the tedious and unrealistic parts with new problems," he added, eyeing the maps on the nearby table with a pained expression. Frank didn't miss the way that Harper and James looked at each other warily.

The guild leader looked at Frank's escorts. "You two can go back to your post. I can take it from here." They both gave curt nods and stepped out of the tent.

Frank couldn't help but note the way Harper and James acted without protest – or the respect in their eyes. This Liam was not Alexion. He was much, much more dangerous. He commanded respect, which was compelling evidence that this was a man who got shit done.

"So, it sounds like you encountered our druid *friends*," Liam said, leaning against the table and crossing his arms. "What happened exactly?"

Frank told him his bullshit story. He didn't try to embellish on what he had said to Harper and James. He had been blindsided and bound by plants. The people had stolen his stuff, and he hadn't gotten a good look at them. Then they had left him stranded in the wilderness.

"They didn't even have the courtesy to kill me and give me a quick trip back to my respawn point," Frank muttered as he finished his tale, shaking his head ruefully.

"You should be thankful they didn't," Liam replied in a somber tone.

"What do you mean?" Frank didn't need to feign confusion.

Liam sighed. "That's sort of a long story. We set up a small player settlement north of the mountains. If you head far enough north, the ice and snow melts away into a sprawling desert. So, we set up shop along the mountains' edge.

"It is out of the way, and not likely to be destroyed by other players or NPCs," Liam said in answer to the unspoken question on Frank's face.

The guild leader grimaced. "Unfortunately, this game can be rather *realistic* – perhaps too realistic sometimes. We soon realized we needed supplies. Crafting materials, potion ingredients, that sort of thing. You can't get everything from one location. We sent a few parties south through the mountains to set up a trade agreement in Barrow."

Liam rubbed at his neck. "There is a new service that offers airship delivery, but we're not near a port city, and they can be absurdly expensive. Basically, we're stuck with the fantasy equivalent of snail mail."

"Alright, I'm following you so far," Frank said slowly. "But how

do these *druids* factor in exactly?"

"In short, they killed our scouting parties," Liam said. "Actually, killing them would have been rather merciful. Instead, they captured them, bound and poisoned them, and then fed them to some sort of ice beast – alive."

Liam met Frank's eyes. "You want to talk about the downsides of this game compared to the classics? You couldn't get eaten alive in older MMOs. Well, I suppose you *could*. But it didn't look real, did it? Just some pixels on a screen. A lot different than seeing – and feeling – your arm being ripped off and watching a creature eat it in front of you."

Frank swallowed hard. He had experienced some of the more… realistic aspects of AO firsthand and so he could relate. The image of rainbow-colored eyes suddenly appeared in his mind's eye, and he shuddered involuntarily.

"These druids aren't your happy, tree-loving variety. They are basically mountain-dwelling sociopaths," Liam said, pacing the tent now. "But we couldn't really do anything about it. All we knew was that they lived somewhere up here in the mountains and the only pass was constantly clogged by brutal blizzards. So, we waited."

Liam pointed at the sunlight shining through the tent flap. "Needless to say, the weather has improved lately, and we were already prepared to march." He barked out a harsh laugh. "Actually, I've never seen a group of players so motivated to actually put in the work. If only I could find a way to feed them to monsters to get them to handle normal guild errands."

Frank could now understand why James had been so trigger-happy when he had caught sight of Frank and the pair's willingness to follow Liam's orders. *Shit, they're organized, and they have a damned good reason for being here*.

"Uh, so it sounds like I was attacked by the same group," Frank offered, trying to keep up his act. "I guess I was lucky I just got away with a beating and the loss of my equipment."

Liam nodded, rubbing at his beard thoughtfully. "You were indeed. My guess is that there must be a group outside the nearby valley. I'll have to make sure we post more sentries."

"Wait, what valley?" Frank asked.

Liam's attention refocused on Frank, and he hesitated for a moment, as though weighing something. "Why don't I show you?" Liam offered finally, gesturing at the tent flap.

The pair stepped outside, and Liam led Frank over to the western edge of the camp. They soon arrived at a narrow, rocky pass. Frank almost didn't recognize it at first. Without the ice and snow, the pass looked very different. Yet he was still able to tell that it led down

into a valley between two nearby mountain ranges. Even at this distance, Frank could just barely make out the Ancestor Tree in the distance, its branches partially hidden by puffy, white clouds.

Liam moved into the pass ahead of Frank and stepped through what appeared to be a shimmering blue veil. Frank's brow furrowed in confusion. That hadn't been there before. He had a bad feeling about this.

As he followed Liam, a notification appeared in the air in front of Frank.

System Message: Entering Dungeon - The Valley of Haven

This dungeon is designated as a "raid-level" encounter. Seventy or more players are recommended to successfully complete this dungeon.

This dungeon is a one-time event and will not reset once completed. Any players who die inside the dungeon will respawn at the entrance within 45 minutes in-game time.

"It's a raid dungeon?" Frank asked in shock. That blue veil definitely hadn't been there when he'd left the valley.

How was that even possible? Was this AO's way of allowing these players to get revenge on Haven and its residents? Or maybe it was because the players saw the druids as an enemy? Were all dungeon events relative then? Like could one group enter the valley and see a dungeon, but another group would just see a plain rocky pass? That implied that the game could selectively create dungeon events? That just opened a rabbit hole of questions that Frank wasn't certain he could answer.

"It is indeed," Liam answered with a nod. "One of our scouting parties immediately stumbled on this pass once the snow cleared. Our guess is that the druid camp is somewhere in the valley below." He gestured farther down the pass.

"We have a decent number of air mages. They aren't the best," Liam offered with a frustrated grimace. "They can't quite fly yet, but they can sort of… *hover*. We've had them trying to map out the valley from a distance before we strike. Those were the shitty maps you saw back in the tent."

Damn it. This guy Liam was smart. He was trying to plan his attack and scout out the valley before he struck. He was taking this

seriously – which was bad. Really, really bad.

"So, uh, why are you telling me all this?" Frank asked, eyeing Liam.

The guild leader shrugged. "We could always use more boots on the ground," he explained. "Besides, I notice you are missing a guild tag, and there's likely no love lost with these druids. Could be some loot in it too."

He's trying to recruit me! Frank suddenly realized. He just shook his head, his mind wheeling as he tried to process the information Liam had given him while also maintaining his act.

"Okay, that makes sense. But even with me, it doesn't seem like you have the numbers," Frank offered. He had done a rough count as they walked through camp. He'd seen maybe a dozen players online. "That notice mentioned the dungeon would need at least seventy players."

Liam nodded, his eyes twinkling. "Fair enough. But we're just the advance party. Our scouts found the location, and we came up here early to set up a base camp. Plus, there are a lot more of us who are here but offline right now.

"We've also been sending out email blasts and messages. We should have the rest of the guild here in the next 10-12 hours in-game. By that time, we'll have the camp set up and a plan of attack in place. We could probably be ready to strike by sunrise tomorrow."

"The rest of the guild?" Frank asked. "How many people is that?"

Liam grinned slightly. "Another hundred or so."

Frank just stared at the older man in shock. Liam was talking about an army.

Suddenly, the crafting areas made sense. They would block the pass and use the camp as a fallback position. Even if they lost players, they could let them respawn at the entrance, re-outfit them and send them back into the action. And that assumed that they even needed to do that. Liam seemed competent. Frank expected that he wasn't planning to just let his players run in like lemmings. He knew what he was up against, and he likely planned to strike hard and fast.

The other players are learning, Frank realized.

People like Liam weren't just flailing around blindly anymore or treating this like just another MMO. Liam was taking this seriously. He was planning ahead and marshaling his troops and resources like he was fighting a real war. This wasn't much different than how Jason had approached AO since the beginning.

Which meant these players were dangerous.

"So, what do you say?" Liam asked, interrupting Frank's thoughts, a grin still plastered on his face. "Interested in getting a

little revenge?”

Chapter 22 - Realistic

Frank heard a whistle and changed course slightly. He was now south of the player encampment and walking a winding trail back to the east. He had begged off joining Liam's crusade against Haven – explaining that he just wanted to get back to a real town and do some low-level quests. He didn't exactly have to fake that part. Things really had spiraled completely out of control ever since he had stepped in that pile of bear shit.

This game sometimes…

Since Liam had confirmed that there wasn't much but desert to the north, Frank had used that as an excuse to turn on his heel and head back south. He hadn't been eager to run into any guild members on their way to Haven.

Frank rounded a bend in the trail and stopped, his brow furrowing. There was a bush along the side of the canyon wall that looked unnatural – the leaves and branches just a bit too dense given the recent change in the weather. Even as he stared at the brush, the vegetation dropped away, wilting back into the ground.

The hunting pack sat on a small outcrop of rock jutting from the side of the nearby ridge. Silver hopped down. "So, how did it go?"

Frank grimaced, trying to think of where to start.

"Ahh, so terrible. And we were on such a lucky streak lately…" Hoot quipped, picking up on his expression.

"That pretty much sums it up," Frank muttered. He then proceeded to tell them what had happened – sparing no details.

As he finished his story, Howl crossed his arms, scowling at him. "I'm surprised you didn't take this Liam up on his offer."

Frank met the man's eyes, anger simmering in his veins. He still hadn't forgotten the beating Howl had given him. "Really? After everything I've gone through, you are still questioning my loyalty?"

Silver rested a hand on his arm. "I think we're just on edge." She spared a glare at Howl. "However, this isn't the time to bicker. These travelers pose a very real threat to Haven."

Howl snorted. "You mean they will be crushed as soon as they enter the valley?"

"I think you may not understand," Frank said slowly, trying to rein in his anger. He reminded himself that these people may not have really encountered players before – not in a large-scale battle with dungeon mechanics in play. Kidnapping a few unsuspecting players didn't really count.

“Really? Then enlighten me,” Howl demanded. “How are these soft travelers going to fare against our entire town? We know the area, and we have the advantage.”

“They will respawn,” Frank said bluntly. “Not miles away, but at the entrance to the valley. Haven is a dungeon now. I’m not sure how that’s even possible, but it is. Which means you’re fighting an enemy that is nearly immortal. As long as they are conservative and play this smart, they will *eventually* win. That is a certainty.”

Howl’s grizzled face warped in a frown, but he hesitated to respond this time.

Runner was less reserved. Frank could see the full import of the situation sinking in. It was the way the man rubbed at his eyes tiredly and slumped his shoulders, some of the fight draining from him. “What’s your impression of their leader?”

“Smart and experienced,” Frank answered. “This isn’t his first raid. He knows he will have the advantage, and from what I’ve seen, he knows how to use it. This will be a war of attrition and Haven picked the short stick. If Liam holds the entrance to the valley and doesn’t overextend, he will eventually overcome Haven’s forces.”

Silver tapped her lips with a finger, pacing the small area beside the trail. “We could attack the camp and kill the travelers that are there. If they haven’t entered the valley, they should respawn back at their town, no?” she asked Frank.

He tilted his head in thought. “I don’t think that will solve your problem. At best, it would delay them. Most of the travelers also aren’t around right now, so you can’t kill them. And even if we take out a handful, they will just come back. If anything, you may just piss them off even more.”

Frank met her glowing sapphire eyes. “They are motivated, and they want blood.”

“I don’t understand this vendetta,” Howl grumbled.

“Really?” Frank finally snapped, his anger getting the better of him. “Because you all fed them alive to some sort of ice demon. It sounds like the demon also made sure his illusion made an impression. Death might be temporary for my kind, but it doesn’t mean the experience is pleasant or painless.”

Howl finally broke Frank’s stare, and Frank turned to find Silver looking crestfallen. She bit at her lip, her eyes clouded, and he could practically see the thoughts spinning in her head. She was responsible for this. She had cut the deal with the demon and sacrificed the travelers. Now it was coming back to haunt them.

“So, what do you suggest?” Hoot asked, breaking the silence that lingered in the air.

Frank looked up in surprise, realizing that Hoot was addressing

him. The others were also looking to him, their gazes expectant. This was new. They hadn't ever asked for his opinion before.

Frank ran a hand through his hair. He could think through this. He wasn't Jason, but he had encountered a similar situation before. The main difference here was that it wasn't clear that the defending force could retreat. When they had gotten trapped in the dungeon north of Peccavi, their small group had always planned to leave. That had made things easier. The enemy players weren't likely to return since they would have moved on.

But things were different here. Even if Haven managed to drive the players away, there was nothing to stop them from returning. The only choice then was to make the defeat so painful that the <Knights of the New Republic> decided that revenge wasn't worth it. Although Frank wasn't certain how to accomplish that.

His thoughts drifted back to his initial encounter with the council. Silver had mentioned permanently destroying a character by planting them beneath the Ancestor Tree, but was that even possible? He hadn't missed the part where she said it was some sort of legend or myth. So that didn't exactly seem like a foolproof plan.

And even if he assumed this was an option, it also wasn't clear what conditions would need to be met to destroy someone's character. Did they need to be alive? Dead? How would they get them back to the tree? How many feet under the ground? Could they manage it before the players respawned?

Besides, if Liam played this smart, he would make sure to recover the players' bodies and corpses as they fell. He might not know about the tree, but he knew that his players could lose their stuff on death. And if they didn't strike hard at first, the enemy guild leader would likely figure out what was happening. That meant that the Ancestor Tree was an "all or nothing" option. Frank didn't get the impression that Liam was stupid – not at all. So, they would only get one shot at that.

Some small voice in the back of his mind also suggested another option, but it was rather… messy. If they couldn't easily hit the players where it hurt – their character and loot – then they would need to make the experience extremely unpleasant. Although, it wasn't clear how much torture would be permitted before the game masters intervened. Those idiots were also likely to do more harm than help.

Frank hesitated for a second. Was he really considering torturing other people just to drive a point home? Hell, that was what had created this mess in the first place. He shook his head.

There was also one last option.

"The best approach might be to abandon Haven," Frank said

softly.

He looked up to find the others just staring at him.

"That's not going to fucking happen," Howl said in a low growl. This sentiment was echoed on the faces of the others.

"Look, I don't like that answer either," Frank said. "But there are only so many ways to hurt the travelers. The two best options would be to either permanently kill them or take their stuff – in other words, make it so costly that they don't want to return.

"But both options have a large risk of failure. The travelers could still come back. And even if you succeed, what is that going to cost Haven?" Frank demanded. "How many of your people will die? They don't respawn."

He locked eyes with Silver. "Are you willing to risk your families?" He could see her waver, glancing to the side. Frank knew she was thinking about Sophie and the other children in Haven.

"You can't be entertaining this!" Howl said, jumping to his feet and approaching Silver. The others were also watching her, waiting for her to voice her opinion.

She just shook her head. "Frank makes some good points," she said finally. Silver met Howl's angry gaze. "What would you suggest we do instead? Place our own people at risk fighting some sort of immortal enemy? How about your own mother and sister?"

Howl's resolve wavered slightly.

Silver let out a sigh, and then her expression hardened.

"But this isn't really our decision to make. We have secured information on our enemy. Our next move should be to report to the council. Which means we need to get through that pass."

Frank's brow scrunched in thought. "Can't Archie deliver the news?" he asked, waving at Hoot.

The slender man grimaced, glancing at the owl that sat nearby. "Not exactly. Archie can communicate with other Tamers, but it is much more difficult. Even then, it tends to be vague images and feelings. Complex concepts like respawning travelers and military strategy may be just a bit outside her abilities."

Archie hooted softly from a nearby branch, as though reprimanding the Tamer.

"I'm sorry," Hoot said with a small smile. "But it's the truth."

Silver nodded. "We need to relay this information in person. And it sounds like we need to move quickly. If we wait too long, the travelers will reinforce their camp, and one of our options will be off the table."

No one in the group asked her which option she was referring to. The answer was clear. If they waited much longer, escape wouldn't be an option – at least not an easy one.

Frank grimaced, already anticipating relaying this information to the council. What would they decide to do? He could only hope that they saw reason and decided to get the hell out of the valley before it was too late.

His gaze shifting to the trail leading back north. That was a problem for later. Right now, they needed to deal with the immediate issue. How the hell were they going to get past the player camp?

Frank turned back to Silver. “We should probably wait until nightfall. Many of the travelers will log off then, and we may be able to slip past without being seen.”

“Why not just kill them and burn their camp down,” Runner offered, his eyes twinkling with bloodlust.

“And potentially alert them to our presence?” Frank pointed out. “Liam already suspects there is a hunting pack outside of Haven based on my cover story. We don’t want to let him know that the group returned to the valley or that they might have informed the residents about what the travelers are planning.

“In short, knowledge is power.”

He had learned a few lessons from Jason. This game didn’t reward brute force. AO was about strategy and creativity. They wanted to keep their enemy in the dark for as long as possible, especially since Liam held quite a few advantages already.

Silver nodded. “Frank’s reasoning makes sense. We wait until nightfall and slip back into the valley.” She glanced at Howl and Runner. “And if any of the travelers get in our way, you have my permission to spill their blood. Although, I suspect you will get plenty of other opportunities before this is over.” The two men nodded curtly before glancing at each other, matching grins on their faces.

Frank couldn’t help but agree with Silver. He had a bad feeling about this. He could only hope that the council saw reason and decided to abandon Haven. As Spider set about reforming the hedge, Frank’s eyes lingered on Silver.

He didn’t want to see these people die.

He didn’t want to see Silver die.

Chapter 23 - Sneaky

Frank and the hunting pack were perched on a nearby cliff overlooking the enemy camp and the entrance to the valley. The sun had long since set, and a heavy, almost-oppressive darkness hung over the mountaintops. However, Frank and his packmates were unaffected by the gloom. With his *Night Vision*, he could still make out the player encampment clearly, a sprinkling of campfires easily giving away its location.

The players had continued to work diligently. The crafting tables had now been completed, and they had begun constructing a rough wooden bulwark around the camp – effectively walling off the small crossroads and the pass that led into the valley. The walls were built of crude, heavy beams and the beginning of a rampart was being constructed behind them, giving the players a vantage point.

The bulk of the players' efforts had been focused on the pass. The bulwark there already stretched at least five or six feet into the air. This didn't mean much with their hunting pack's abilities. They could easily scale or leap over that obstacle. At least for now. But given time, the players would continue to build up the fortifications until they posed a real threat. Frank couldn't help but notice that the majority of the walls were placed within the shimmering blue divide that marked the beginning of the dungeon. Any players that died on the walls would respawn inside the dungeon.

His eyes skimmed to his system UI, looking at his message icon. He had messaged Jason and Riley while they waited for nightfall, but they hadn't responded yet. Maybe they were busy with something else. Eliza wasn't an option since she was likely already in the Sea's Edge by now.

Even so, it had been a longshot. They didn't have much time. Besides, Frank knew that the Twilight Throne's forces were already spread thin in the wake of Thorn's attack on the city and most of their remaining forces were working with Morgan to set up leveling grounds in the outlying towns. Sparing a division to help the residents of Haven was a big ask. He could already visualize what Jason would say. "What did they stand to gain?"

Frank didn't have a good answer for that. An alliance with a bunch of homicidal druids that sacrificed players? He let out a sigh. He couldn't count on reinforcements.

Frank was on his own.

Even as that thought crossed his mind, he glanced at Silver

where she knelt nearby. Her sapphire eyes were focused on the enemy camp. She caught Frank staring at her and turned her head slightly.

"It's almost time," she said quietly.

Frank could only nod. "We need to try to get through this as quietly as possible," he said, waving at the camp. As he had predicted, many of the players had logged off for the in-game night, disappearing in a rift of multi-colored light. However, that didn't mean much since it was still a weekend in the real world. A quick message would have a couple dozen players logging back in almost immediately.

"If an alarm goes up, we should expect the travelers to pop back in at random," he continued, looking at the rest of the group. "So, watch yourself. As soon as fighting starts, we will likely be outnumbered within just a few minutes. We need to get through the camp quickly."

Howl cracked his knuckles, a grin on his face, like he was hoping they would trip an alarm. Hoot and Spider, however, looked more somber.

"Alright, let's do this," Silver said.

With that, she *shifted*. Her form filled out almost instantaneously. Her limbs extended and thick white and silver fur replaced her armor. Runner and Howl followed her lead, *shifting* into their animal forms. With a thought, Frank's legs transformed. Thick hair sprouted from his skin and his knees let out a sickening pop.

Spider called a vine and used it to lower himself down from the ledge. Silver and the other Shifters took a much more expedient approach and simply leaped over the ledge, hurtling down into the darkness.

Hoot glanced at the ledge before turning to look at Frank. "Uh, you want to give me a hand? I can't help but feel sort of left out."

Frank let out a soft chuckle. "Sure, grab hold."

He felt Hoot's slender arms wrap around his neck, and then Frank took a deep breath and leaped. The bottom promptly dropped out of his stomach, and the wind raced past as they fell into the darkness.

* * *

Within a few minutes, the group was crouched in the brush just outside the enemy camp. The players had posted scouts around the low walls ringing the campsite – proof that Liam had taken Frank's story to heart. Since this was the only known entrance into the valley, Liam was being careful.

There was little chance that Frank's group was going to be able to get around the camp without taking out or distracting the guards. Frank might be able to fly into the valley, but that wouldn't help the others, and he doubted the council was likely to listen to the corrupted outsider. He needed the others to testify before the council.

"What now?" Frank asked Silver. "Can we poison or knock out the guards?"

Within only a moment, she had reassumed her human form, her ears twitching as she listened intently for any sign that they had been detected. "Drawing them away would be better," she murmured. "As you said before, we don't want to give away that we were here."

"I guess I could be the distraction," Frank offered tentatively. If there was a *Diversion* skill, he'd be a grandmaster by now... "Worst case, I could fly back into the valley afterward."

Silver gave him a long look, a strange expression flitting across her face. "Fine. Try to draw their attention to the north, and we'll make a run for it when we have an opening. Everyone got it?"

They all nodded in agreement.

With that out of the way, Frank conjured his wings. He needed to reposition.

Spindly growths erupted from his shoulder blades, his skin itching like mad as the limbs grew and thickened. Feathers soon coated his new wings. With one last look at Silver, Frank launched himself airborne, beating his wings hard until he loomed a couple hundred feet above the camp.

He made a beeline north, passing over the camp, the wind whipping through his ragged furs. Then he drifted downward, settling back on the ground with a soft thump and a grunt before dismissing his wings. He was now alone, darkness surrounding him on all sides. The rustle of the nearby trees and the faint chirp of insects were the only things that broke the silence.

Now he needed a distraction.

Frank scanned the area around him. He saw a few boulders perched along a nearby cliff. They weren't in a position to hit the player camp, but they would make a lot of noise if they fell over the side of the ridge. With another grunt of pain, he transformed his legs and leaped up onto the cliff edge, his padded feet scrabbling against the loose stone and dirt before he caught his balance.

He might be weaponless and *corrupted*, but he was certainly mobile!

Frank dismissed his legs and summoned his *Bear Form*, the muscles in his forearms twisting and growing as claws emerged from his fingertips. He stared down at the clump of boulders.

Why am I always digging? he wondered. *Maybe I should have*

consumed some of the mole-kin. After this was all over – assuming they survived, of course – he could always make a trip back east with one of Eliza's caravans.

Either way, for now, he needed to get to work.

His clawed paws lashed out with terrible force. Throwing off a continuous spray of dirt as he worked, Frank raked and tore at the soil around the boulders. Just the act of digging was creating a lot of noise, and he heard a shout go up from the enemy camp. Yet he didn't stop. Frank kept going until he felt the side of the cliff tremble beneath him.

As he saw hairline fractures forming in the dirt, he shifted his legs and kicked at the rocks powerfully. The blow splintered the stone and sent him hurtling backward. It was just in time since the entire side of the ridge chose that moment to give way. The boulders tumbled down the incline along with most of the cliff, creating a miniature avalanche of rock and dirt that cascaded downward with a thunderous roar.

If the players had been alarmed before, the camp was now bristling with activity. It wouldn't be long before they sent scouts to check on the noise.

Frank quickly summoned his wings and took to the air. He floated above the camp, keeping his distance and using the darkness to mask his presence. There was no moon tonight, and the feeble light of the stars wasn't enough to give away his shadowy form. He still made sure to maintain some distance, wary of the players using a light spell.

His foresight was quickly rewarded as a globe of white light suddenly erupted to the north of the camp – a mage making the area visible for the small group of players that were moving northward to inspect the source of the commotion.

Frank turned his attention back to the camp. A few flashes of multi-colored light indicated that Liam must have called in reinforcements. He was being cautious. However, most of the players were heading toward the north, their attention diverted. Even the guards on the southern edge of the camp had stumbled northward, trying to catch sight of what was going on.

Player discipline only stretched so far.

Frank strained to see in the darkness, trying to spot the telltale flash of silver and white to the south. For several seconds, he didn't see anything. Then he caught a slight movement. He could see his hunting pack moving around the southern edge of the camp, using the distraction to edge toward the entrance to the valley.

As Frank looked north, he could see that the players had made it to the miniature avalanche, sifting through the loose dirt and dust.

Meanwhile, the others in the camp were already moving to reassume their posts – the scouts must have messaged the raid that it was nothing to worry about. He had forgotten about how quickly the players could communicate.

Damn it, Frank thought.

He could see that Silver and her group weren't nearly close enough to the entrance of the valley. If he didn't do something, they would be sandwiched between two groups of players – those moving back to their posts and the defenders on the southern wall. They would likely still make it into the valley, but they would give away the element of surprise.

He needed another distraction – and fast!

As he looked at the guards along the northern wall, Frank suddenly knew what he had to do. But it was crazy. And stupid. Mostly stupid. The last time he had done something like this, he had almost gotten eaten by a demon.

He could already visualize Silver glaring at him.

She'll forgive me.

Maybe.

Frank took a deep breath, then his wings stilled, and he dove.

The wind rushed past him in a torrent, pressing his hair and feathers flat as he sped toward the earth – a speeding, organic bullet. His focus centered on a lone player on the northern wall, but his target was a few dozen yards to the south. He would need some space to pull this off.

Frank transformed his hands, his fingernails extending. He was only going to get one shot at this, and it was going to take most of his considerable strength to pull it off – assuming he didn't slam into the ground head-first, of course.

Yet a part of him felt excited by what he was planning; it hissed and clawed from the dark corners of his mind. He could feel a fire burning in his chest, and his vision was stained crimson. His heart thumped in his ears, still audible over the howl of the wind.

"*Kill*," a shadowy voice whispered. For an instant, Frank had the impression of dark gnashing teeth and claws, but then it was gone.

Yet he didn't have time to second-guess what was happening to him.

Frank sped downward at a crazy pace, and the ground seemed to be hurtling upward to meet him. His eyes were trained on his target, a lone man standing along the northern wall. The player had found some high ground above the fledgling fortifications to get a better view of what was happening to the north.

Frank suddenly broke hard with his wings, the limbs straining and burning from the abrupt move. He just barely broke out of his

dive before hitting the ground, skimming only about five or six feet above the dirt. He was moving so quickly that his surroundings were merely a red-hued blur.

His target loomed ahead of him.

And then he was within arm's reach.

Frank clutched at the man with his magically enhanced claws, his arms straining as he grabbed the player and pulled him close. In a flash, he was already past the camp. Frank angled upward, using extreme care. At this speed, even small adjustments were likely to send him careening into the ground or a tree.

From the other players' perspective, it must have looked like a dark blur snatched the player from thin air and then promptly disappeared.

Only a few seconds later, Frank was soaring back up into the air, the player clutched in his hands. The man was screaming his lungs off, his voice echoing through the air as he squirmed in Frank's grasp, trying to get a look at what had grabbed him. Frank couldn't let that happen. With a well-placed blow, his claws tore at the man's neck, the player's shouts turning to a strangled, gurgling cry.

Then he dropped the player.

The body tumbled and careened through the air, doing a cartwheel as it fell back to the earth. The player rotated until he was staring back up into the night sky. With his *Night Vision*, Frank could see the player struggling to stem the tide of blood streaming from his throat, his eyes bulging with panic and fear. Then they locked on Frank's dark form, his silhouette barely visible against the night sky.

The player slammed against the ground a moment later – directly in the center of the enemy encampment. He landed on his back, the force of the blow so powerful that a portion of the player's torso exploded, his ivory ribs erupting from his chest. His head and limbs were twisted at an unnatural angle, and crimson blood was already staining the ground around him.

The camp erupted into renewed shouts of alarm as players rushed to the man's body. Unlike the avalanche, every player had likely seen the dead man's icon blink out in their raid menu. Meanwhile, multi-colored rifts of energy tore open as more and more players began logging back into the game. Everyone's attention was focused on the interior of the camp – on the ragged remains of one of their own.

As Frank looked upon the carnage, the strange presence in his mind seemed to purr in approval at the destruction he had caused. It was urging him to keep going. How many of these players could he kill before they stopped him? He was a predator of the skies. He could practically see the shadowy creature from his encounter with the

demon in his mind's eye, its claws drenched in blood.

Frank shook his head, trying to clear it. Trying to calm himself down. The shadow creature only reluctantly released its hold on him, and the red tinge that had been overlaying his vision gradually bled away. He knew he should be alarmed by this weird mental shift, but he just felt confused and disoriented.

Frank blinked quickly.

Then he remembered why he was there.

His attention shifted to the southwest, where he could see a small group circling the camp – using the distraction to slip past the newly minted fortification and into the valley leading toward Haven. He let out a sigh of relief.

He was suddenly aware that he was still hovering above the enemy camp, and his stamina was swiftly depleting. He needed to get the hell out of there. Frank set a course toward the west – toward Haven – beating his wings furiously. Both to flee the angry players and to avoid the fresh question that now sprang to mind.

What the hell is happening to me?

Chapter 24 - Urgent

"What's taking them so long?" Howl grumbled. The gruff man was leaning against a wall comprised of intricately interwoven branches. The group had been squeezed into an antechamber adjacent to the meeting lodge.

"To be fair, we did have the council call a meeting in the middle of the night," Hoot replied in a dry tone as he brushed Archie's feathers gently.

"Just be patient," Silver said quietly. Despite her calm words, she continued to pace the small room, her eyes clouded and distant – likely thinking about the upcoming meeting.

Frank just stood there, a few translucent blue screens hanging in the air in front of him. They had all made it safely through the pass and had then hightailed it back to Haven, setting a blistering pace that Hoot and Spider had struggled to match. However, they stayed as close to the two men as they could and tried to move discreetly. They couldn't be certain whether the players had sent any scouts down into the valley.

Either way, they had made excellent time.

Frank's eyes hovered on the screens in front of him. As soon as he had been given a free moment, he had quickly pulled up Rogue-Net and begun researching the <Knights of the New Republic>. He had soon found their guild website and chat server – which, believe it or not, was open to the public. There were quite a few posts related to the upcoming raid on Haven, and the chat server was practically abuzz with activity.

From what Frank could tell, Liam was using the upcoming raid as a recruiting event, which explained why the guild was so open to the public. Looking at the site and server traffic, it looked like Liam's plan was working well. It was actually a pretty smart idea.

Assuming he was only fighting NPCs, Frank thought to himself. However, that was probably a pretty safe assumption from Liam's point of view.

As Frank scrolled through the guild's chat logs, he began to see why Jason played his information so close to the vest and why he had been rather unenthusiastic so far about trying to recruit people into <Original Sin>. Information was power inside AO, and the larger a guild grew, the harder it was to hide information. Hell, Frank found at least two players that had been streaming video from Liam's camp, providing a detailed rundown of the work they had done since the

hunting pack had made it into the valley. Frank had already decided he needed to find a way to eliminate this problem when they started actively recruiting for <Original Sin>.

He froze as he saw a chat message made within the last few minutes, real-world time. It had tagged the entire guild server.

> **Liam:** @everyone, our preparations for the raid are coming along nicely. We should be ready to begin the assault on the valley tomorrow morning, in-game time. Please be prepared for a long raid.
>
> For those of you who weren't logged in an hour or so ago, I'd like to address the commotion in the camp. It seems we were attacked by some sort of flying beast. It caved in a portion of a nearby cliff and killed one of our men. We do not believe that the NPCs are responsible.
>
> The player who died wasn't able to get a clear view of the creature, but we did get this screenshot. Any members still traveling from Taris to the camp or standing guard should exercise care. New beasts may be roaming the mountains now that the weather has cleared.

Frank could feel a heavy weight settle in his stomach as he read the first paragraph. Tomorrow morning? He glanced at the in-game clock, wincing as he saw the late hour. They didn't have long left. The only upside was that he had done a good job of not revealing his presence. The players had clearly assumed he was some sort of monster.

Curious, Frank tapped on the linked screenshot.

His eyes widened as the image loaded.

It was from the view of the fallen player, his back on the ground. He must have taken the screenshot from his in-game camera right before he died. Something dark and inhuman hung in the air. Its torso was massive, and its wings were spread over a dozen feet, framed by the starry mountain sky. Its arms rippled with muscle and ended in jagged claws. What held Frank's attention, however, were its eyes. They glowed a dull crimson. When had that happened? Was that some sort of effect from his *Rage* ability?

If it was, then no one had ever mentioned that before.

Frank couldn't help but stare at the image, his stomach roiling in confusion. He knew that this was him, but the image looked very similar to the shadowy creature he had witnessed during his encounter with the demon, and he couldn't shake the memory of how that strange voice had whispered in his mind. It almost felt like something outside himself had been encouraging him to keep going.

"What's the matter?" Silver asked. She had sat down beside him and was watching his expression carefully.

Frank swallowed hard, swiping away the image quickly. "Uh, I was checking for information in my world. It seems that the travelers will be attacking tomorrow morning," he explained.

He saw shock glide across Silver's face. "Tomorrow morning?" she muttered, her ears and tail drooping.

"You know what this means," Frank said as gently as he could. There was only one realistic plan at this point. They just didn't have enough time to prepare a reasonable counterattack – at least not one strong enough to push back the players and deter them from re-entering the valley.

Silver picked up on his unspoken message. She closed her eyes, and he could only imagine that her mental wheels were spinning, searching for any other answer to her people's predicament.

The rest of the group hadn't missed this exchange, and a heavy silence hung in the air. No one seemed to want to be the first to break it.

They were saved a moment later as a guard entered the room. He wore rugged leathers, but Frank saw no weapons. A Shifter then.

The man locked eyes with Silver. "The council is ready. Please come with me."

The group moved to leave the room and Frank rose from his seat, swiping away the remainder of his screens. However, the guard held up a staying hand. "Just Silver and the hunting pack. Not the corrupted one."

The hair along Silver's arms rose. "*Frank* will be attending this meeting, as well. He has information that is imperative for the council to hear."

"But the council's instructions…"

"Frank is coming. We don't have time to bicker," Silver said in a low growl. "Now get out of the way."

The guard's eyes widened at her tone, but he backed out of the entrance, letting the group pass. Frank could see confusion sweep across the man's face as he passed. However, he wasn't in the mood to appreciate Silver coming to his defense. They had larger problems at the moment – *much* larger problems.

* * *

The group soon stood in the center of the massive meeting lodge, facing the three council members. Aside from the silent guards that ringed the room, the chamber was gloomy and empty. No birds or beasts clung to the rafters, and no residents stood on the chamber floor.

"Why have you called this meeting of the council?" Leandra asked, the older woman's gaze alert despite the late hour. She spared a pointed look at Frank but didn't comment on the fact that he was present.

"We assume this is an emergency," Alderas offered, waving at Silver to begin.

Sthren had stayed silent during the initial exchange, his gaze unfocused and his lips moving as he mumbled to himself. Frank didn't miss the fact that a deep frown was etched across the thin man's face. He could only assume he was reaching out with his plants, searching the valley and the surrounding area for danger. If so, then he would soon be able to confirm what they were about to report.

"There is indeed an emergency," Silver said, speaking loudly and firmly. Gone was her reticence and Frank saw that it had been replaced with steely resolve, her shoulders squared and her gaze even.

"I won't beat around the bush," she continued. "Travelers have amassed outside the valley and are planning to attack Haven."

This was met with a stunned silence as the three council members stared at the small group. "Surely you can't be serious," Leandra said finally. "What about the storms and the ice ward? How do they plan to bypass our defenses?"

So, the council knew about the deal with the demon? Frank thought to himself. *Silver wasn't acting alone then.* He had suspected as much from the hunting pack's reaction, but this exchange had just confirmed it. At the same time, he felt a gnawing weight in the pit of his stomach. He could still remember how Howl and Runner had reacted to the news of the demon's death. Could they really expect more understanding from the council?

"The Beast is dead," Silver answered curtly.

"How do you know this?" Alderas demanded. Then his eyes drifted to Frank. "You didn't…"

"We took Frank to the Chasm to attempt to unlock his *Communion*," Silver interrupted, not skipping a beat. Although, from the look on the council members' faces, she clearly hadn't gotten her

group's itinerary approved first. Frank could feel the weight in his stomach doing summersaults now.

"As you know, this is considered a last resort when one of our people have difficulty reaching *Communion* through less traumatic means," Silver added.

"You did what?" Alderas demanded, smacking his palm against the arm of his chair. "You mean you took him there to die, don't you?"

Silver tilted her head but nodded reluctantly. "I will admit that I was hoping he would fail. In that case, we could simply feed him to the Beast as an early sacrifice."

Frank didn't feel the anger he was expecting at hearing Silver say those words aloud. He still didn't agree with her actions – or the deal these people had struck with the demon – but he understood *why* they had done it and *why* she had been inclined to feed him to the demon. He knew firsthand how compelling fear could be as a motivation.

"I told you to train the traveler, not try to kill him," Alderas snapped, his patience fraying. "And now you are telling me that your actions have put us all in danger?"

Silver flinched but held her tongue.

"Clearly, the traveler is still alive," Leandra observed dryly, meeting Alderas' eyes for a moment. "And the Beast is still dead. Perhaps we should hear what happened?"

Alderas grimaced, but slowly backed down, waving for his daughter to continue.

Silver looked away, biting at her lip as though uncertain how to continue. How did she admit to the council that she had betrayed her own people for a traveler? And a corrupted one at that? Frank could see the flash of fear in her eyes, as though Silver was preparing for the blow that she knew would land once she told the council the truth.

In an instant, Frank could see how this conversation would unfold. He could see it in Alderas' tense posture, as though he were just a moment away from *shifting*. In the way that Leandra looked toward the guards that encircled the room. The council would blame Silver for what happened. They wouldn't listen to the group's appeal for how to deal with the travelers. If Silver admitted her own guilt – that she had slain the demon – then that simple admission might doom her own people.

Before Frank knew what he was doing, he had stepped forward. "I killed the Beast."

Silver looked at him in shock – as did the other members of the hunting pack. Howl looked like he was about to protest, but Spider placed a restraining hand on his arm, slowly shaking his head.

“Did you now?” Alderas said, looking at each member of the group. He did not appear to be entirely convinced.

“I did,” Frank replied, giving a curt nod. “Silver and I were attacked by the cave leeches that dwell in the Chasm. We were forced to cave in a part of the underground cavern in order to escape but found ourselves trapped. In our search for a way to escape the caverns, we stumbled into the Beast’s lair. I… I was not aware of Haven’s arrangement with the creature. When he attacked me, I defended myself,” Frank said, weaving together both truth and fiction.

He also couldn’t afford to give the council time to challenge his story, recalling the nightshade flowers that Sthren had employed last time. He could already see Sthren’s eyes starting to focus on the conversation again.

Frank continued quickly, “However, this Beast was not what you think. It was a demon that had disguised itself with an illusion. It had been feeding on the travelers your people sacrificed to it and planned to attack the neighboring kingdoms once it grew in power.” He dug a hand into his pocket and his fingers wrapping around the small cloth-wrapped parcel nestled there.

“I also believe that this demon helped orchestrate the cultists’ initial attack on Haven,” Frank continued, eliciting a surprised murmur from the guards that ringed the room. “He then preyed on your fear to entice you to accept his deal. He revealed as much to me during our encounter.” He could see the council members staring at him now. He needed to drive his point home – give them evidence that what he was saying was true.

“But you do not need to believe my words alone. I have proof. Specifically, the demon’s heart.” Frank gently unfolded the cloth until the demon’s heart was on full display, the crystalline surface shining with multi-colored energy.

All three council members were focused on the gem in Frank’s hand, and he could practically feel them inspecting it. He saw the moment when they realized he was telling the truth, their eyes widening almost imperceptibly.

“And you saw this happen?” Alderas demanded of Silver.

She nodded.

“And the rest of you?” The burly man’s question was directed at the rest of the hunting pack. They all nodded – even Howl and Runner, although they looked like they had just swallowed something sour.

Frank was just thankful that Sthren had been distracted, and he had gotten through the story quickly – no telltale white flowers blooming behind him. Their deceit would likely not have passed the Elder Grower’s test. But the lie had been necessary. They couldn’t

afford to undermine Silver's credibility. Not right now. If they survived this, then they could deal with the truth.

"Damn it," Alderas muttered, slumping back onto his throne. Leandra and Sthren looked similarly dazed.

Frank could sympathize with them, but it would only get worse from here.

Silver seemed to be thinking the same thing and stepped forward, taking over from Frank. "Unfortunately, that is not the worst of the news," she said forcefully. "Many of the travelers we sacrificed were part of a guild. As soon as the demon died, the weather began to clear, and their forces moved swiftly through the mountains. They have set up a camp at the entrance to the valley. We believe they have more than a hundred soldiers."

"A hundred?" Leandra echoed, as though not believing Silver. "In such a short time?" She shifted her attention to Sthren, her unspoken question clear.

The thin man rubbed at his face, but she saw only resignation shining in his eyes. "They tell the truth," the Elder Grower said simply. "The plants outside the valley are more sparse, but many near the pass have been cut down."

"Frank also infiltrated their ranks before we came back to Haven," Silver continued, watching her father carefully.

The Elder Shifter was practically seething as he listened to this news, his breath coming in short gasps as though he was struggling to hold back his *shift*. From Frank's perspective, a faint red aura seemed to coat the man's skin. Yet Alderas' anger didn't seem to be directed at Silver.

Frank caught faint flashes of emotion and a brief image. He saw Alderas welcoming a familiar robed man into their ranks – he had seen that man in the dungeon north of Peccavi. The cultists. Anger and guilt warred for dominance. Alderas had let the Master into Haven. That mistake continued to haunt him even now – the loss of his wife and the estrangement of his eldest daughter. Now he had endangered his people again? Then Frank felt Alderas recoil from those thoughts as though they burned him.

The image suddenly vanished, and Frank was left reeling. What the hell was that? It felt similar to what had happened with Silver in the Chasm. Could he sense memories now? He shook his head slightly, trying to block the images and feelings he could still feel radiating from Alderas. The red glow seemed to grow with each passing second, the aura pulsing in time with the Elder Shifter's heartbeat.

"The travelers plan to attack tomorrow morning," Silver continued. "The valley has also been converted into a dungeon, so any travelers that fall will respawn back at the pass leading toward Haven.

We will be fighting an army of immortals."

"Then we simply crush them before they can respawn," Alderas said, slamming his fist on the arm of his throne, the blow cracking the wood and thick hair appearing along his skin as he inadvertently *shifted*.

"We will wait for them to enter the valley, lure them into the eastern forest, and then let the hunt begin," Alderas continued, his voice coming out in a growl. "The beasts and the trees will come to our aid and slay them where they stand."

"That is not an option," Silver insisted, trying to keep her voice calm. "These travelers are smart and careful. We barely made it into the valley. It is unlikely that they will overextend. They will scout the valley carefully before moving forward."

"Then we will take the fight to them," Alderas declared.

"To fight in the narrow pass?" Silver demanded. "They have already begun building fortifications to block the entrance to the valley. And any of their own that fall will be replaced within a few hours. Can you say the same for our people?"

"Then what would you have us do, *girl*?" Leandra demanded. Frank saw anger in her eyes as well, not all of it caused by the players. The glare she directed at Silver was accusing. Frank could feel her unspoken judgment. She blamed Silver for this, at least in part.

Silver grimaced but did not drop her gaze. She took a steadying breath before answering firmly. "Retreat."

A heavy silence hung in the air at this single word, only interrupted by the guards that shuffled at the back of the room. The hunting pack made no move or gesture of surprise. They had all known that it would come to this. Their best option was to run.

"You would have us flee our home?" Alderas questioned, his voice now eerily calm. Yet Frank knew his demeanor was a lie that masked his true emotions. The red aura surrounding him had only grown. His anger was almost palpable.

"I would," Silver said firmly, her sapphire eyes resolute. "If we start now, our Growers might be able to create a bridge allowing us to pass out of the western end of the valley and scale the mountains. A few of us could remain behind to delay the travelers. We could then destroy the bridge behind us – burn it down so that the travelers cannot follow."

"We would leave everything we have built," Leandra said. It wasn't a question. "Our crops, our homes… the Ancestor Tree. You would leave these things to the travelers?"

"A small price to pay for the lives of our people," Silver retorted.

"You would have us retreat…" Alderas murmured in disgust,

shaking his head.

"For now," Silver said firmly. "There is nothing to stop us from returning, but on our own terms – when we are prepared to fight and can strike at the travelers before they have a chance to prepare."

"If we have a home to come back to," Leandra retorted with a scowl.

"And we stand to lose what?" Silver demanded. "Simple things? Homes that we can rebuild? Gardens that we can replant? We have wronged the travelers for our own benefit, and now we are being asked to pay the price. Either with the blood of our people or simple things… things that we can replace."

Silver shook her head. "And even if they destroy these things, perhaps we deserve it…"

"How can you say that?" Leandra demanded in a harsh tone, shock flitting across her face as she leaned forward in her seat.

"How can I say that?" Silver echoed in surprise. "We sacrificed these travelers to a *demon* in exchange for our own protection. That creature *ate* them alive."

Leandra waved a hand. "Only for their bodies to return like the spring. Death is not permanent for their kind." Frank could see Alderas give a curt nod of approval. "This move speaks of pointless vengeance. The same blind hatred we sought to flee has followed us here."

"Yet their deaths are not without a cost. *We* caused this," Silver insisted, her eyes flashing as she waved toward the east. "Now, these travelers are motivated. Angry. Disciplined. How is what we have done to them any better than what the cultists did to us? We used them for our own purposes, throwing away their lives without considering the consequences!"

At this statement, a low growl came from Alderas, his eyes flashing menacingly at the mention of the cultists. Even Sthren's reserved demeanor cracked, the stoic Grower glaring down at Silver.

Frank could see the logic of her argument, but this was the wrong move – especially at a time like this. These people might be compassionate. They might have let him enter the valley – a single unthreatening traveler. But the pain that the cultists had caused ran deep, and no amount of sympathy or compassion could truly overcome the hatred that the residents of Haven harbored in their hearts.

Even now, Frank could feel their guilt turn to anger and denial. The faint aura had grown until his vision had taken on a familiar red cast as though Frank were channeling his *Rage*, but he saw no notification appear in his peripheral vision. Something within him sung in harmony with the fury he saw fill Alderas's eyes as the man

struggled not to snap the arm off his throne. He also saw the pain and resolve in Leandra's gaze – frustration and accusation radiating off her in crimson waves.

Silver could see that she had spoken out of turn. "Father, please," Silver said, her voice cracking as she pleaded with him. "If we fight these people, we will lose more than just our homes. Please heed my advice. Retreat is our best option."

Alderas took a deep, ragged breath and then his eyes locked on Silver's. Frank saw determination there, and a deep raging anger. It was not the look of a man that backed down from a fight. Frank could see a similar resolve radiating off all three council members in undulating crimson waves.

"We will not leave. And we will not heed your advice. You have already proven that your judgment is questionable."

Alderas took to his feet, pacing forward. "You blame us for this situation? I don't agree. It is you, daughter, that has brought this threat to our door. *You* chose to ignore my instructions and took the corrupted one to the Chasm. *You* failed to stop him from slaying the demon. And, in so doing, *you* have endangered us all."

Silver winced at his words, angry, frustrated tears blooming at the corners of her sapphire eyes. "But…"

"As I said before, there are no buts," Alderas interrupted firmly. "I am Alpha, and my verdict is final. We will not flee our home. We shall meet the travelers on the battlefield and defend what we have built here."

"Then we will lose everything," Silver said quietly.

"If you feel that way, then you have no place on the frontlines," Alderas snapped, his eyes flashing and a multi-colored haze drifting across his skin. "Take your hunting pack and the traveler and see to the protection of the children. You will remain inside Haven."

A growl rumbled from Alderas' throat. "The rest of us will take the fight to the travelers."

At this last statement, Alderas lifted his head to the sky and let out a piercing howl that seemed to vibrate the very walls of the council hall. Frank could feel the message imparted by that sound, and he felt that familiar, almost primal part of his soul shift restlessly, thrumming its approval.

Within only moments, answering calls echoed throughout the town as the residents and creatures of Haven stirred from their slumber. They howled their fury into the night sky, and everything around Frank was awash in a red tide. He faltered slightly, stumbling to the side. Hoot caught him, giving him an uncertain look.

Frank had no idea what was happening to him. But one thing was certain.

Haven was being called to war.

Chapter 25 - Ready

Morning came far too soon.

Harsh ruddy orange light streamed above the mountaintops that ringed Haven. To Frank's eye, the sun looked a touch too red, as though foretelling how this day would unfold. He found himself leaning against a building and staring at the morning light, an uneasy feeling curling in his stomach.

The town was quiet. Too quiet. Alderas and the rest of the council had herded the townsfolk together and left several hours ago – moving into the forest to the east in preparation for the assault by the <Knights of the New Republic>. Frank had long since swiped away the window with the guild's chat server. He knew the attack was coming and he was in no position to use that information now.

Frank felt the branches beneath his back tremble gently and looked over to find Silver standing beside him and leaning against the same building, her glowing blue eyes fixed on the mountaintops. She didn't say anything immediately, and Frank made no move to break the silence. What could they really say or do that would make the situation any better?

"You could leave, and no one would blame you," Silver said softly. Frank almost thought he had imagined it until he saw her glance at him out of the corner of her eye.

He knew she was right. He could simply fly over the peaks and be long gone before the players arrived. But that felt wrong. He knew these townsfolk held no love for him, but he was at least indirectly responsible for this situation. He grimaced, even as that thought occurred to him.

That wasn't quite right. It was an easy excuse. These people had made their own deal with the devil long before he had arrived. Frank had played no real part in the way this had unfolded. It would have come to a head regardless of his involvement.

No, he knew the real reason he stayed – the one that was standing right next to him.

"I'm not going to leave," Frank said firmly, meeting Silver's eyes.

Silver just nodded and looked away, but not before he saw a strange emotion flit across her face, one that he couldn't quite place. The red aura hadn't returned since the evening before, and no sudden flash of insight occurred to him. He was left with his more mundane senses, which were as blind and stupid as always.

"Hoot says that Alderas and our forces are in position in the forest east of Haven. The travelers are also preparing to strike soon," Silver offered.

"And what of Abigail and the children?" Frank asked.

"We have moved everyone to the meeting lodge. Although, if our forces fall, I suspect it will do little good…" Silver trailed off, her gaze distant.

Frank knew who she was thinking about. "Shouldn't you be with Sophie right now?" he asked gently. "I'm sure she must be frightened."

"I do her no good by fretting over her." Silver grimaced. "I do no one *any* good back here sitting on my hands," she said bitterly, looking down at her slender fingers.

Frank had no easy way to respond to that. Their job guarding the children was important, but he agreed that they would likely be far more useful on the frontlines.

Silver glanced up at him. "Thank you, by the way."

Frank gave her a questioning glance.

"For what you did during the council meeting. If… if I had admitted to saving you at the expense of the town, my father would never have listened to me," Silver muttered.

"Not that it seemed to help," Frank replied dryly.

"True. This is so stupid," Silver said, anger flashing in her eyes as she pushed away from the wall. "After all his lecturing about tolerance and community, he decides to march to war? He blames me for mistakes that he and the council made long ago? He forgoes any strategy and places our hunting pack at the rear?"

Frank lowered his eyes, his thoughts troubled. He still had no explanation for how he had picked up on Alderas' emotions. He had no way to explain the strange red aura or the shadowy voice in his head. But he did know what they *weren't*. This wasn't *Communion*, that much was obvious. This was something different. Something that felt like dark fangs and blood-drenched claws.

The feeling was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time – leaving him feeling conflicted and confused. At the same time, the information he gleaned was useful. It allowed him to piece together another person's motivations far more easily than he could have on his own.

"I think your father is afraid. He feels guilty," Frank said slowly. He looked up to find Silver frozen in place.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

Frank rubbed at his neck, trying to choose his words carefully. "I suspect Alderas feels responsible for the situation. Didn't he let the cultists infiltrate Haven? That cost him a wife and, in some ways, a

daughter. I suspect you pushed him away. Maybe even blamed him?"

"I didn't—" she began to protest feebly.

"You took a different name and joined the hunting pack," Frank interrupted, looking at Silver meaningfully. She couldn't meet his eyes, glancing back toward the mountaintops.

"And yet he let you into Haven," Silver muttered.

"Possibly an attempt at redemption? Maybe a way to alleviate his own guilt and try to correct some of the harm he caused?" Frank offered, shaking his head.

"By taking the same risk?"

"It makes sense if he was trying to help you," Frank suggested. "I doubt he wanted you to shut out everyone in your life. You will notice that he tasked *you* with training me. He could have picked anyone – Abigail, for example. I suspect he wanted you to try to open up to people again."

Silver stayed silent and so Frank continued, his gaze distant as he tried to recall the emotions he had felt during the meeting. "But your father didn't just let the cultists into Haven, he also approved the deal with the demon and the sacrifice of the travelers. A deal that resulted in this attack on the valley. In short, he made mistakes – big mistakes. First out of naivety and then out of fear."

"Yet he blames me and places us at the rear? We have only ever tried to protect Haven and its people," Silver snapped, the hair on her arms rising slightly. She whirled on Frank, her eyes shining with anger. In that moment, something clicked into place for Frank. He could see what Alderas might have been thinking.

"Does he really blame you, though?" he asked softly. Silver just stared at him.

"I mean, was he angry at you or at himself?" Frank continued in a hesitant voice.

"It's easy to scapegoat another person, certainly easier than taking responsibility for your own actions. I'm not saying it's right, but it does sort of make sense. Your father has already lost a lot – a product of his own mistakes. Dealing with the idea that this war might also be his fault…" Frank trailed off, letting the implications of what he was saying hang in the air.

Silver shook her head, not quite looking at him. He could see that she still clung to her anger, not quite willing to accept his explanation. Not that he blamed her. Understanding another person's perspective didn't always make their actions any easier to swallow.

"When we're afraid or upset, we don't always make the wise or sound decision. We aren't always willing to face reality. It's easier to bury your head in the sand or try to rationalize the situation," Frank said softly.

In some ways, he wasn't just talking to Silver anymore.

He was certainly guilty of doing the same thing.

Hadn't he been afraid when he started playing AO? He had spent all his time trying to catch up to Jason, telling himself that he just needed a group. And what had he done after Thorn had killed them both? He had left to conquer the outlying villages, trying to convince himself that this was the best use of his time. And so he had missed out on completing the Keeper trials. He had spent so much of his time in-game struggling to catch up with his friends and blaming everything and everyone else around him for his failures. But it was Frank himself that had been responsible for falling behind. His *fear* had continued to hold him back – long after he had learned how to fight.

That needed to change. He could see that now. If he was to keep moving forward, he needed to overcome that fear, once and for all. Otherwise, he would make the same mistakes as Alderas. He couldn't keep looking for excuses for his situation.

Frank shook his head, refocusing his attention on Silver. Her eyes were distant, but some of the anger had faded and had been replaced with her own fears. No matter what her father may have said to her, she still cared about him. She cared about her people. She cared about Sophie. The stakes for her were very real.

Frank reached out and took Silver's hand, and she glanced at him. "Whatever happens today, we will do as Alderas asked. We might not be facing the travelers directly, but we will protect the children. We will make certain that nothing happens to them."

To his surprise, Silver didn't pull away. She simply nodded, her eyes gleaming with a sheen of moisture.

"Oof, am I interrupting something?" Hoot asked, appearing around the corner of the building. Silver quickly snatched her hand away and stepped back from Frank, putting her back to Hoot.

"No. No, you didn't," Frank replied, watching Silver.

"Hmm, okay then," Hoot said, arching a skeptical eyebrow. "Well, I just wanted to mention that the attack has begun. We should get into position."

"Of course," Silver said, turning back to the pair. The moisture in her eyes was gone, replaced with an ironclad resolve. The warrior that Frank knew had returned, and her eyes carried the promise of death. She stalked past Frank and Hoot, heading directly for the meeting lodge.

As Frank looked after her, he felt a faint note of pride but also a touch of guilt. Silver had done what her father couldn't. She had overcome her fear. She was committed to the task she had been given. She might have her moments of weakness, but she faced her

challenges head-on. In many ways, she was far braver than Alderas.

He hadn't mentioned it to Silver, but Frank hadn't missed the fact that both of the Elder Shifter's daughters were in the rear, where it was safe. Frank suspected that wasn't an accident, but he didn't intend to complain. He could relate to Alderas. He was terrified at the idea that Silver might not make it through this – more than he was willing to admit. Frank resolved right then to do anything that he had to in order to protect her.

"You coming?" Hoot asked, following his gaze and giving him a knowing look.

"Yes. Let's do this," Frank answered firmly.

* * *

"Finally! Here you go," Howl grunted and tossed a package at Frank as he entered the meeting lodge.

Frank scrambled to catch the parcel, glancing at Howl in confusion. As he peeled back the cloth, he found his old armor and axes hidden inside. He lifted one of the blades free, staring at the metal. It felt strange to hold the weapons again – almost unnatural. He had spent so long with only his shapeshifting abilities that it felt awkward and somewhat clunky to hold the axes.

Still, he couldn't turn away any advantage, not right now. So, Frank began equipping his old gear, and his axes soon swung at his waist once more.

"Uh, thanks," Frank said to Howl. He received a curt nod in response.

Once Frank was ready, he eyed the room. The children had been herded into the massive structure, along with many of the less-capable animals that resided in the town. Maybe thirty people were scattered about the space, a testament to how many of the residents of Haven were combat-worthy. More than a hundred birds and beasts clung to the building's rafters, shuffling and twittering nervously.

They all looked worried. An unknown and immortal foe lingered at their border and marched into their valley with a singular goal: to kill the residents of Haven and burn their town to the ground. Frank saw the impact of this fear in the way the children huddled together and the tense silence that hung in the air.

He saw Sophie sitting with the other children. In contrast to their scared faces, she remained calm, smiling, and talking with the others. She had apparently appointed herself as leader of the group, trying her best to lighten the mood and appease their fears.

Strong kid, Frank thought. His eyes flitted to Silver, where she inspected her equipment. Although, he supposed he knew where Sophie got it.

Frank noticed Abigail moving among the children, offering kind words and handing out small packages of food. Herbert sat on her shoulder, his eyes vigilant and alert. As she saw Silver enter the room, she broke off her conversation and headed their way.

"How are they holding up?" Silver asked.

"As well as can be expected," Abigail said with a sad smile. Herbert met Frank's eyes and gave him a nod of recognition.

"I have reinforced the building," Spider interrupted, pacing toward the group. Frank could see that thicker branches now reinforced the walls, twining through the other limbs even as he watched.

"And if we need to flee?" Silver asked.

The thin, stoic man frowned. "I can create an escape," he answered tersely. "It will take time, though."

"Let's just hope it doesn't come to that," Hoot muttered.

"We will be fine," Howl said, sharing a look with Runner. "The full council and the entire town stand between the travelers and us. They won't know what hit them."

Silver grimaced, not appearing entirely convinced. "Maybe. But we're still going to be cautious. You and Runner should patrol the town. Stay hidden."

The two men looked surprised. "You think they might attack here? How?"

"I don't know," Silver said, shaking her head. "But we're not going to take any chances. Now go."

Runner and Howl looked skeptical, but they followed her orders. Within moments, they had both shifted and sprinted out of the building.

Frank could sympathize with Silver. Her actions seemed extreme. There was plenty of distance and a small army between them and the players. Yet he could still remember the intelligent gleam in Liam's eye. The man might surprise them.

With that thought, Frank realized he might have been a little inattentive himself. He quickly pulled up the guild's chat server and skimmed the rows of text again. His eyes hovered on a few new raid channels that had been added that morning. They were all locked and designated with code names.

Perhaps he divided the raid into smaller groups? Frank wondered. *But why? And then why lock the channels?*

He didn't have long to consider this.

Hoot's eyes suddenly went distant, and he drew in a sharp

breath. He must be viewing the valley through Archie's eyes. Everyone's attention turned to the Tamer, waiting for him to give a report.

"What does Archie see?" Silver asked gently, prodding him.

"The travelers are moving into the valley," Hoot said in a distracted voice. "They are nearly halfway through the plains and are approaching the forest."

"Alderas must plan to draw them in and then ambush them among the trees," Silver offered quietly.

Frank bit his lip. That seemed like a sound strategy from the council's point of view. The trees offered plenty of vegetation for their Growers, and their Shifters would be more dangerous among the trees. They might also be able to attack the players from behind with the larger Tamer companions.

Yet it was strange that Liam would commit to a frontal charge like that. It would leave his forces exposed from the flanks. And if they needed to retreat, the barren fields leading to the pass would provide little cover. Something felt off.

"How many travelers are there?" Frank asked. He kept glancing at the chat server, hoping to find any indication that Liam might have planned a surprise attack. He found nothing. Only the normal general chat of a raid on the march. His eyes hovered on the locked channels, wishing he could see what was being said in there.

"I… I'm not sure," Hoot replied, shaking his head. "A lot, from what Archie can see."

Maybe I'm wrong. That sounded like Liam had committed most of his forces. Although, the bird was notoriously bad at counting.

Silver glanced at Frank. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"It could be nothing…" He trailed off, deep in thought.

"They are nearing the forest," Hoot reported absently.

What would Jason do in Liam's position? Frank wondered.

The travelers already had an inkling of the abilities used by the residents of Haven. Even if the hunting packs always ambushed and poisoned the travelers, they had seemed to know about the plants and the *shifting* abilities. Once a player died, they would be able to review the battle in the deathscape, and they had certainly gained some information if Silver and her crew had taken them hostage.

That also meant that Liam would know he was fighting an incredibly versatile and mobile force. The forest would be a death trap for his men. This was fighting on the enemy's home turf. So why the hell would he commit his forces to a blind rush?

Frank's eyes widened. Unless he wasn't. Unless this was a *distraction*.

"Hoot," Frank said urgently. "Have Archie shift her attention.

Look at the edges of the valley, not the force approaching the forest."

Hoot cocked his head owlishly, his brow furrowing. "Okay."

After a tense moment, he said, "I… I don't see anything."

Frank bit his lip. Then he remembered the offhand comment that Liam had made about his air mages. They could only float – not fly. He had seemed really irritated about that point. Frank had assumed that it made mapping the valley harder, but that didn't really make any sense. If the mages could rise high enough, they could see most of the valley. Which implied that there was another reason Liam had been upset.

He could feel a weight settle in his stomach. *God, I hope I'm wrong.*

"Check farther up the mountain," Frank instructed. "They might not be flying. They might just be skimming along the ridge ringing the valley."

Hoot's frown deepened as he concentrated. "What is this?" he murmured.

Then his eyes widened in alarm. "Oh gods!

"No! Fly, Archie!" Hoot shouted.

The Tamer suddenly collapsed, screaming. He clawed at his eyes, howling in pain. His limbs convulsed as though he had touched a live wire – an electric current rippling up and down his body.

The children looked panicked, staring at the group with wide eyes. Abigail was by Hoot's side in an instant, her fingers touching his scalp and multi-colored energy winding around her fingers. The screams and convulsion slowly receded until the man was merely sobbing, still cradling his eyes.

"What is this? What's happening?" Frank demanded, looking at the rest of the pack.

He could see the answer in their eyes.

"Archie… Archie must have died while Hoot was still connected. If so, then he experienced Archie's death firsthand. The experience can be… traumatic," Silver explained, swallowing hard.

Then she steeled herself and stepped toward Hoot, grabbing his hands and pulling them away from his face. His eyes were bloodshot, and they kept roaming the room – unable to focus on anything. Silver cupped his chin with one hand, forcing him to look at her.

"He's not ready," Abigail said softly.

Silver ignored her. "I know it hurts, Hoot," she said, not unkindly – yet her voice was insistent and firm. "But you need to tell me what you saw."

"They… the travelers…" he croaked, his eyes struggling to focus on her face.

"Please, Hoot. Others may die if we don't act quickly," Silver

said.

The man took a deep breath, visibly trying to calm himself. “They are moving along the ridge, floating just above the ground. Each group had a yellow-robed mage.”

“How many?” Silver demanded.

Hoot shook his head. “I don’t know. Archie…” He choked at saying his pet’s name. “Dozens. Dozens at least,” he muttered.

“Then there was a flash of light,” Hoot murmured, his eyes wide. “So much pain…” He collapsed then, his hands covering his face as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Silver met Frank’s eyes, and in that moment, they both realized what was about to happen. Liam had sent a diversion to the forest and then moved forces around to flank Alderas. In an instant, Frank could see the strategy. His time spent watching Jason strategize had not gone to waste.

Liam’s main force would move into the forest, suffer some casualties, and then pull back – making sure to recover the bodies of the fallen. Alderas would lead the hunt, assuming the players were being routed. He would follow the players into the barren plains leading to the pass. That’s when the true battle would begin. The travelers would drop down from the nearby ridges, effectively surrounding the residents of Haven. Even if Liam lost the battle, the casualties would be enormous, and his own soldiers would be back in action quite quickly.

“We don’t have any way to warn them,” Silver said in a tortured voice.

Even as she spoke, Runner and Howl came sprinting back into the room. Howl immediately shifted back into human form, stumbling slightly at the abrupt transition.

“Travelers,” he said in a ragged breath, his eyes wide and wild.

“Travelers are inside Haven.”

Chapter 26 - Wounded

"How many?" Silver demanded.

"At least a dozen, maybe more. They are searching the town. We likely only have a few minutes," Runner said, reassuming his human form. His eyes darted to Hoot where he lay on the ground, sobbing and cradling his eyes. "What hap—?

"Archie is dead," Silver said shortly. They didn't have time to sugar coat things. She glanced at Frank. "We also believe that the council and the bulk of our forces are being ambushed as we speak. It doesn't look good."

"What are your orders then?" Howl demanded. Gone was his reticence and surly nature. In the moment, there was only the pack and survival.

Silver's eyes drifted to the children that huddled near the back of the meeting lodge, their eyes wide and frightened. The dozens of animals that still lingered in the rafters peered down at them, seeming to pick up on the anxious mood of the humans. Their occasional murmurings were the only sound echoing through the room.

Frank saw Silver's gaze lock on Sophie.

"You know why they came here, don't you?" Frank asked quietly.

It was clear now. He had guessed part of Liam's plan, but not all of it. The battle that would take place in the plains was only the first step. Even if he won there, many of the residents of Haven would likely escape. The guild leader didn't want a never-ending fight against a guerilla force on their home turf. He wanted a clean victory. To obtain that, he needed leverage – a bargaining chip.

Frank had badly underestimated the man.

"Yes," Silver said. "They want captives."

The others shuffled uncomfortably.

"We need to retreat," Frank said quietly.

"To where?" Runner demanded. "Where can we go that they will not follow?"

"Nowhere is safe. Not forever," Silver murmured. "But we can buy ourselves some time to come up with a plan, and we can prevent our people from being taken and used as pawns." She met Runner's eyes. "We can retreat to the Ancestor Tree."

Silver glanced at Spider, and he tilted his head in response, his gaze unfocused, likely trying to sense the players through the nearby plants. "They are coming," he whispered.

Even as he spoke, Frank saw what appeared to be orange fireflies blossom along one wall. The pinpricks of light soon gave way to faint trickles of smoke. It was clear that the players had some mages among them, and they were aware that the group was inside the building. They must have seen Howl and Runner retreat inside the meeting lodge. Rather than attack the group head-on, the players intended to burn them out.

"We need you to get us out of here," Silver directed Spider. "Try to be discreet. We will buy you some time."

The thin man nodded and then hurried off to the back corner of the chamber, murmuring under his breath. As Frank watched, the branches began to unfurl and coil together until they exposed the plant's roots, buried deeply in the soil. Those tendrils began to shift and move, funneling out of the dirt below the room and swiftly forming a narrow passageway that led downward at a steep angle.

Spider was digging them an escape tunnel.

"I will see to Hoot and the children," Abigail said abruptly. She glanced at Herbert on her shoulder. "Will you please help the hunting pack?"

The hamster nodded before dropping from her shoulder and scurrying over to Frank. Without waiting for an invitation, Herbert scaled Frank's pantleg and assumed a perch on his shoulder, giving him a look that seemed to say, "This doesn't mean we're friends." At the same time, Abigail helped lift Hoot to his feet, half-dragging and half-carrying the catatonic man to the back of the room.

Then Silver, Frank, Runner, Howl, and Herbert turned to face the entrance to the meeting lodge. Four Shifters and a hamster against at least a dozen players. When the fires didn't force them to evacuate, Frank knew their enemies would enter.

It was only a matter of time.

"No one gets through us," Silver said quietly, her voice coming out in a low growl.

The others simply nodded. The three Shifters immediately assumed their animal forms. Runner leaped up onto the rafters, resting on his newfound perch and his eyes focused on the doorway. The fires along the walls continued to grow until a dull orange blaze could be seen all around them, streamers of smoke drifting into the room.

Frank hefted his axes, one in each hand. He could feel his heart thumping in his chest, his palms sweaty against the metal shafts of his weapons. They felt awkward in his hands. Unnatural. He had become accustomed to having his hands free – ready to adapt to the situation. Yet they were what he had.

His eyes focused on the doors to the council chamber. For a moment, he thought he caught a pulse of crimson light – not unlike

what he had seen with Alderas and with Silver. In an instant, he knew what was about to happen.

"They're com—"

He was cut off as the wooden limbs of the door were blown apart in an explosion of flame, sending fragments of wood flying into the chamber. Thick black smoke immediately rushed into the room, a combination of the fires that raged along the walls and the newly smoking remains of the door.

Frank caught another flash of red in the dense cloud and barely lifted his axes in time to block a dagger as a player suddenly dropped from *Sneak*. Another player's blade slid along Frank's side as he was struck from behind, just barely managing to twist out of the way in time to avoid being impaled on the blade.

And then Runner was there.

The snow leopard leaped down from the rafters, landing on the first rogue and burying his claws in his neck. Crimson blood sprayed from the wound as the player clutched at his throat, his eyes bulging. Then Runner's claws ended his life.

Frank didn't spare the dying player a second glance.

He pivoted on his heel, his axes dancing as he exchanged a rapid-fire series of blows with the second rogue. The hooded figure dodged and danced around each swing in a fluid, almost boneless way that reminded Frank of Jerry. As each blow missed, Frank could feel his anger grow until his *Rage* ability activated, his entire vision suddenly awash in red.

Yet the enhanced strength didn't help. A dagger blade slid against Frank's ribs, his own blood trickling down his skin. His next blow missed again, just a beat too slow. The axes were too unwieldy, too cumbersome after so long spent using his shifts.

He saw the rogue feint and knew that he would try to retaliate on his next strike. Instead of deflecting the blow, Frank let it come. The blade slid into his thigh, a dull burning pain blooming in his leg. A grim smile curled his lips as Frank dropped his axes, the metal rattling against the floor of the chamber.

With barely a thought, his arms bulged and rippled, claws extending from his fingernails. He grabbed the player's arm, locking it in place. He saw the man's eyes widen in shock. Then Frank's other claws struck home, tearing the man's hand from his arm. The player let out a scream of pain, backpedaling swiftly. Frank was ready, and his legs shifted as he lunged forward and prepared to land a killing blow.

His claws raked against metal, a shield suddenly hovering in his field of view. With a frustrated growl, Frank grabbed the edge of the shield and kicked with his transformed legs. His new enemy stumbled

backward, and the momentum launched Frank in the other direction, creating some room between them.

This gave him a chance to see the battle unfolding in the meeting lodge.

Two of the players lay dead on the ground, and a third was wounded, but more were streaming into the room and starting to build a defensive line. Light from a white-robed mage near the back of the enemy line illuminated the player Frank had maimed. Lightning crackled along the staff of the air mage beside her. In between Frank and these flimsy casters rested a group of heavily armed warriors robed in thick plate and carrying tower shields. Each one held a spear in one hand as they created a tight shield wall.

The Shifters were now all on the ground – the four of them against at least ten players. No words were exchanged as the two groups eyed each other tensely, just waiting for an opportunity to rejoin the attack, but neither quite daring to be the first to expose themselves. Frank spared a brief glance behind him and saw Abigail herding the children through Spider's passageway as quickly as she could.

Herbert chose this moment to abandon his perch. He jumped off Frank's shoulder without warning and scuttled across the floor like a brown blur. This movement was enough to end the brief truce.

Lightning blasted across the room, targeting Frank's burly form. He leaped to the side, barely avoiding the energy in time. However, he was thrown off balance by the concussive force of the spell, and his shoulder crunched against a burning wall. The light of the blast and the thunderous crack of displaced air disoriented him for a moment. His vision was swimming, and the sounds in the room sounded hollow and distorted.

Frank shook his head to try to clear it.

He was shoved out of the way by a dark form, an arrow barely missing him. He didn't get a chance to thank Howl as the players engaged. The front rank stomped forward, keeping their shields raised and close together. Each time a Shifter neared, they stabbed forward with their spears, creating a pocket for their casters and rogues in the back to attack.

In the relatively tight quarters of the building, the Shifters were at a disadvantage. They fought best in the forest and wilds where they could strike at random from any direction – not in a face-to-face encounter with well-trained players on level ground. They were being pushed ever farther back toward the retreating townsfolk.

Then Frank saw Herbert's tiny form hover over one of the downed players, now lying behind the advancing line of players. None of the players spared any attention to the hamster. Herbert looked

back at Frank, his eyes glowing with dark energy. Before Frank could question what the hamster was doing, his little claws tore into the gaping wound in the rogue's throat, and then he burrowed inside.

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then the corpse twitched.

What the fuck? Frank thought, barely dodging another arrow as he backpedaled.

Then the corpse sat upright and turned with jerky movements as though navigated by an amateur puppeteer. It turned to look at the other players, yet its eyes were nothing more than pits of darkness now – eerily similar to Herbert's eyes before he had burrowed into the corpse. Black veins riddled the player's swiftly cooling flesh. The zombie retook its feet and approached the mages from behind, shambling forward quietly.

Before they could react, the zombie drew one of its blades and ran it across the light mage's neck, staining her white robes a bright crimson. The air mage spun at the sound of her dying teammate, and the zombie proceeded to stab her repeatedly in the stomach with a speed and strength that seemed impossible. With one final blow, the corpse speared the mage's stomach and then ripped the dagger upward with a vicious jerk. The player let out one last dying gasp.

The deaths didn't go unnoticed. Several of the players on the front line let out a shout as they saw their teammates' icons flash gray in the corner of their vision. They whirled, turning to stare at the zombie that now stood behind their ranks. Two rogues stabbed at the animated corpse. It dodged the first blow but not the second, a dagger impaling its flesh. Yet the zombie didn't stop. It slid down the length of metal, and its thumbs plunged into the player's eyes, ripping them from their sockets.

One of the warriors entered the fray, cleanly decapitating the corpse while it was distracted. A moment later, a small brown form scurried out of the body – unnoticed by the players in the room.

Meanwhile, Frank and the Shifters weren't letting Herbert's distraction go to waste.

Frank leaped straight upward, curling and pivoting in midair. His feet touched against the rafters, and he pushed off – hard. The branches crumbled under his feet and he was sent hurtling back toward the players below him.

His enhanced claws struck a player's head with incredible force, ripping it from his shoulders in a spray of blood. The other Shifters were close behind him. Silver's fangs snatched a player's wrist, carving through his flesh until the limb came free and his screams filled the air. Runner and Howl worked together to topple one of the larger warriors, ripping at his neck once he was on the ground.

The players didn't go down without a fight. Frank felt a spear-tip pierce his arm and side, and his health dropped precariously from the glancing blows as his regeneration struggled to keep pace. Howl's and Runner's fur were soon matted with both the blood of their enemies and their own. Only Silver seemed to be unscathed, her white form blurring among the ranks of players in a whirlwind of claws and fangs.

It was a chaos of blood, filled with the snap of teeth and the clang of metal. Throughout all of this, the smoke had thickened. The wooden walls were now brightly lit, and the tendrils of smoke had grown in strength, filling the rafters and billowing throughout the room.

Finally, only three players remained standing. Two warriors and a rogue.

The heavily clad players stood protectively in front of the rogue while he downed a healing potion. They were all breathing raggedly and glaring at the Shifters. Herbert had fled to a corner of the room and was waiting for his chance to claim another corpse.

Howl and Runner had retreated behind Frank and Silver, nursing their wounds. Their health was so low that they were barely able to stand. They were out of the fight, for now at least. The smoke was also growing thicker with each second, causing Frank's throat to burn and obscuring his vision.

They didn't have much time left.

Frank spared a fleeting glance behind him and saw that most of the children and animals had managed to escape. Only a handful remained, with Spider and Abigail standing at the entrance to the tunnel and funneling them inside.

One of the warriors noticed Frank's glance. "They won't escape. We will find them. And then we will kill all of these irritating druids," the player said.

Frank snorted. "Really? Because you all have done so well so far," he retorted, gesturing at the bodies that littered the floor.

The man grimaced, anger flaring in his eyes. Then his gaze panned to the group of villagers that were still fleeing into the tunnel, and a grim smile curled his lips. "We do have one advantage over a bunch of NPCs. We can't really die, can we?"

With that, the warrior tossed aside his shield and grabbed a wand from his belt. Frank's eyes widened in surprise as he saw flames begin to curl around the wooden wand. A ball of flame formed at the tip as he pointed it at the ceiling. Was he trying to bring the whole building down on top of them?

Frank darted forward, trying to stop the man, but the other two players moved to intercept him, his claws raking against a metal

shield. He was forced to twist out of the way to avoid the rogue's blades. Then Frank's attention turned back to the warrior with the wand.

Time seemed to slow as he saw the player smirk at him and then shift his aim down and to the left. Frank followed the trail, and his eyes widened as he saw that the player was pointing the wand directly at the tunnel. Sophie stood in front of the narrow entrance with only two other children, staring down the maelstrom of flame. Of course, she had insisted on waiting until last – helping to ferry the children inside.

The fireball launched forward, the heat causing the air to ripple around its surface, smoke billowing and swirling as it raced through the air.

"No," Frank shouted, trying to switch course.

But he was moving too slowly, and he was too far away.

The fireball inched forward on a direct collision course.

Then Frank saw a white-and-silver blur flash across the room.

And everything sped back up.

Silver's body was sent hurtling into the wall, absorbing the full impact of the fireball. The rogue capitalized on her weakened state, sprinting past Frank. The player blinked out of existence in a flash of yellow energy, appearing above Silver and stabbing downward into her torso with both blades.

Blood jetted into the air, and Silver's form collapsed to the ground.

For a moment, time seemed to freeze again.

Frank saw Silver's prone form. Blood coated her ivory fur, her chest barely moving. He saw the children near the entrance. Sophie's mouth was wide in a scream as tears sprang to her eyes, and Abigail was just barely holding her back. Howl and Runner were trying to help, but they were wounded and too slow.

He saw the rogue standing above Silver, readying a final killing blow.

At that moment, Frank lost all control – his vision awash in a sea of red. That familiar shadowy creature took hold, plunging its claws into Frank's mind. It roared and hissed, demanding vengeance. Demanding blood.

Without even realizing it, a similar roar escaped Frank's throat, filled with rage and the promise of death. He only vaguely registered the sound, as though it were coming from someone else. Frank launched himself at the rogue, his feet splintering the floorboards with each step. In an instant, he was next to the player. The man turned, his eyes widening and trying to shift his weight to intercept Frank.

He was too late.

Frank grabbed his arm, twisting it backward until he heard a sickening crunch. Then he kept going. With a final jerk, he ripped it free, fresh blood fountaining from the ragged wound. He spun on his heel and dropped into a duck, tripping the maimed rogue even as he threw the severed limb at the other two players who were sprinting toward him. The arm got lodged in the wand-wielder's feet, sending him tumbling to the ground.

Frank burrowed his claws into the rogue's neck and then let out a feral growl as he turned back to the other two players. In a flash, he was above the downed warrior, he kicked the man in the head as he tried to regain his feet, stray teeth flying through the air as the player rolled across the floor.

The other warrior hesitated at the ferocity of Frank's attack.

It cost him.

Frank grabbed his spear, snapping the weapon in half like a twig. The man tried to backpedal, holding up his shield protectively, but it wasn't enough. Frank shoved the shield aside and stepped closer. He grabbed the man's head between his two paws, the muscles in his arms surging. The player dropped his shield, beating feebly against Frank's arms with his bare hands. It was nothing – barely more than a nuisance. Then the player's skull caved in with a squelch and crack, and his limp body dropped to the floor.

The last warrior was struggling to crawl away now, unable to speak with his broken jaw and the blood leaking from his mouth. Frank stalked toward him through the smoke, tendrils of dark vapor drifting around his bloodstained body.

He grabbed at the warrior's armor, lifting him to his feet. The man's eyes bulged, and he struggled to speak with his broken jaw.

"Please… Mercy…" he choked, the words almost inaudible.

Frank simply growled in response. There would be no mercy.

"*Make him suffer*," a voice whispered in his mind.

Before he realized what he was doing, Frank grabbed the man's wand from his waist – the same one that had threatened Sophie and injured Silver. He then brought it to the man's eye, giving him a moment to focus on the object.

"I can't kill you. Not permanently," Frank whispered to the man. His voice sounded harsh, almost foreign to his ears. "But I can make you wish I had."

Frank pressed the wand forward, the wood inching closer until it pressed against the man's iris. He felt the moment the player's eye gave way – savoring it with painstaking slowness as the man's garbled cries of pain echoed through the room. Then he shoved forward hard, driving the wooden stake into his brain until the man's body convulsed.

The player's body soon toppled to the floor with a heavy thud and the clatter of metal.

The shadowy creature purred its approval.

All at once, Frank's *Rage* fled him as his stamina began to bottom out. He dropped to his knees, his limbs shifting back to normal. He could hear shouting. Flames licked at the walls, and the smoke was nearly opaque now, his throat burning and raw.

Yet he remembered a white form awash in flame.

Silver.

Frank barely managed to force himself back to his feet and stumble toward Silver's prone form. She had lost her *shift*, her human body now lying among broken branches with Howl and Runner perched above her. Her breathing was ragged, and there was a large bleeding wound in her stomach. There was blood – so much blood – and her fur and skin had been melted by the fireball, leaving sickly warped flesh where the flames had touched her.

Frank shoved the two Shifters out of the way and burrowed in his pack with one hand. He soon found a healing potion, yanked the stopper, and placed it to her lips. Her breathing became steadier, but she was still badly injured.

"We need to get out of here," Runner shouted, placing a hand on Frank's shoulder. The walls of the meeting lodge already trembled with each crackle and pop, and the flames were so dense it was almost impossible to see.

Frank knew he was right. Even if Silver's wounds didn't kill her, the smoke soon would. With a grunt, Frank lifted her gently, and the group made their way down into the tunnel. Spider closed off the entrance behind them as best he could.

Within less than a minute, they heard a thunderous crash, and a roar of flame and broken debris as the meeting lodge finally collapsed. The ground shook, and dust fell from the ceiling, the roots straining to maintain the tunnel's integrity.

Frank was oblivious to all of this. In the darkness, he stared down at Silver – her face streaked with blood, and her eyes closed.

Live, he thought, his throat too raw to speak. *Please live*.

Chapter 27 - Beaten

Frank emerged from the tunnel to a familiar sight. He was standing atop the ridge ringing the Ancestor Tree. He could see the massive trunk in the distance, its roots wrapped around a rocky base. The sun was sinking toward the horizon, part of the orange circle already obscured by the nearby peaks. The waning sunlight reflected across the surface of the lake, creating a shimmering pattern along the water.

It had taken many cramped and anxious hours for Spider to burrow a tunnel to the glade. While the walk might have been more direct, they couldn't risk tunneling a hole to the surface with the players lingering in the valley. However, the process of waiting for the roots to carve a tunnel and funnel away the displaced dirt and debris was slow.

The people and animals who emerged – Haven's children, the native creatures of the valley, and the hunting pack – looked beaten and weary. Heavy circles hung under their eyes. Many nursed minor injuries and burns. As animals emerged from the hole, they immediately scurried toward the lake, lapping at the water frantically, or flew up into the tree's branches, staying close but looking like they still wanted to flee farther into the mountains.

They looked defeated.

But they were alive.

Frank looked down at Silver, who was still cradled in his arms. He had long since bandaged her wounds, but he could do little for the burns. Her breathing was steady, but she hadn't opened her eyes since her injury – no matter how many potions he fed her. Something about the wound wasn't natural.

She seemed so fragile and weak in his arms, nothing like the warrior and the wolf he had come to know. Worry gnawed at his stomach, almost like a living thing. If something happened to her…

He wasn't even sure how to finish that thought. He'd what? Cry over an NPC? Go on a bloody rampage? Those thoughts just left him feeling stupid and helpless.

The knot in his stomach twisted.

A hand rested on his shoulder, and Frank turned to see Abigail standing beside him. "Let's take her down to the bank," she suggested. "We should tend to her wounds."

Frank nodded. She was right. And yet, he hesitated. Treating Silver's injuries would do little good if the players discovered them

here. He needed to take care of their defenses. His eyes skimmed the crowd until he found Spider standing nearby. He gnawed at his lip in indecision, glancing between Spider and Silver.

"I can take her," Abigail suggested gently, reaching out to take Silver from his arms.

Frank had to resist the urge to growl at her – a reaction that would have seemed strange only a few short days ago. Frank bit back at the impulse, carefully handing Silver to Abigail. He was surprised to discover that the woman could easily carry the Shifter's weight. Although, he wasn't sure why he should be surprised by anything at this point.

"I will be there in just a moment," Frank said.

"Take your time," Abigail said softly. "I will take good care of her," she added, giving him a look of understanding.

He simply nodded numbly and then headed for Spider. The slender man was standing with Runner and Howl. Hoot sat slumped on the ground nearby. His eyes were vacant, as though a part of him had died with Archie. Although, at least his sobbing had stopped – that was some small mercy.

"You look like shit," Howl muttered as Frank approached.

"Thanks. And you look like you got the crap beaten out of you by a bunch of travelers and spent half a day in a hole in the ground," Frank shot back.

He received a weak grin in response. They were all in rough shape, and they knew it.

Frank looked at Spider. "We need to secure the entrance to the glade. Maybe some bushes or something? Anything that will buy us some time and conceal this place," he said.

"You mean the massive tree that looms over most of the valley?" Runner asked dryly. "Who would ever think to look here?"

"And besides, since when do we take orders from you?" Howl asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't say it was a long-term plan," Frank replied, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. There was too much going on for Howl's bullshit to get a rise out of him. "And pack leadership is a little *fluid* right now. If you have a better plan, I'm sure as hell open to it."

Silence met this statement.

"I will do it," Spider said finally, bowing slightly at the waist.

Frank eyed the man. He looked pale. And tired. But there was nothing for it.

"Thank you," Frank said.

He glanced at the others. "You lot should come with me. It won't do you any good to work yourself to death. When Spider gets done, we can take turns standing watch."

Howl looked like he wanted to protest, but Runner just looked at him and shook his head. So instead the gruff man swallowed his retort and helped guide Hoot to his feet. Then the group made their way down to the lake, where the other remaining residents of Haven were waiting.

Frank made a beeline for Abigail, spotting her form in the crowd. She had found a perch by the lakeside where a flat boulder abutted the water. Silver lay on the stone, and Abigail was peeling back at the cloth bandages wrapped around her midsection.

Frank heard a sharp intake of breath as he approached.

He didn't have to wait long to discover why.

As Abigail removed the soaked and bloody bandages, they revealed a barely healed series of gashes in Silver's side, blood still leaking from the wounds. It looked like the healing potions had done little – merely stemming some of the blood loss. To make matters worse, the skin all around the wounds was still blistered.

"Why… why isn't she healing?" Frank muttered, staring at the wound.

Abigail shook her head wordlessly. She felt gently at the edges of the jagged flesh with her finger, revealing a dark-green substance coating the wound almost like algae. "It looks like some sort of poison," she murmured. "Something that is designed to prevent healing, maybe? It might have coated the blades."

"Can you treat her?" Frank asked, already dreading the answer.

He could see the worry and pain in Abigail's eyes even before she spoke. "There are *some* healers in Haven that could treat her, but this is far beyond my abilities. We would also need access to ingredients and the village's alchemy lab. Which…"

"Clearly isn't an option right now," Frank finished for her.

"Do you mean she's dying?" a small voice spoke up from nearby.

They both turned to find Sophie standing there. Soot marred the young girl's forehead, and she looked exhausted, but that didn't stop her from understanding the obvious. Her older sister splayed out on a rock, barely breathing, with a bunch of stab wounds in her side was not a good sign.

"No, no, dear, we'll find a way to help her," Abigail said, stepping in front of Silver's body to block the young girl's view of her sister.

Sophie didn't seem to believe Abigail, and she looked at Frank. He could see a stubborn determination there, despite the tears that bloomed in her eyes. She looked so much like Silver in that moment. "Will she be okay? Will she really?" Sophie demanded.

Frank felt his heart lurch, and he swallowed hard.

"Yes, she will," he said firmly, meeting Sophie's gaze. "I will do everything in my power to ensure that your sister gets better."

He crouched down in front of Sophie. "But for now, I need you to help me. You need to set an example – be a member of the pack."

He gestured at the other children, who looked terrified. Their parents were missing. They had been attacked. They had witnessed people dying. "You need to help the other children. Try to calm them. Tell them it will be alright. Be strong for them. That's the best way to help Silver right now."

Sophie followed his gaze, and he saw her suddenly square her shoulder, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I can do that," she said softly.

Fuck me and fuck this game, Frank thought. How could he argue that this wasn't real? It sure as hell *felt* real – painfully and excruciatingly real.

"That's good," he said, patting the girl's shoulder and struggling to keep his voice even. "Thank you."

"Why don't you take Herbert with you?" Abigail suggested, lifting the hamster from her shoulder and placing him in Sophie's hand. "He is good at this sort of thing."

For once, the hamster decided not to be a pain in the ass. He simply looked at Sophie sadly and then settled on the girl's shoulder. The pair soon trudged off toward the other survivors. Frank watched her weave her way through the group of children, drying their tears, guiding them to the lake edge, and bringing others water to drink.

"Damn it," Frank muttered, sinking back against the rock as he watched the girl. Abigail said nothing, but he saw the same helpless pain reflected in her eyes.

Runner and Howl approached through the crowd. They had clearly taken a moment to clean their wounds and remove the soot from their clothing and faces. They had even cleaned up Hoot, although he still looked like the ghost of the gregarious man Frank once knew.

"How is she?" Runner asked, gesturing at Silver.

"Bad," Abigail answered, not needing to mince words with the other members of the hunting pack. "Maybe a few more hours..."

Abigail trailed off as a small bird suddenly lit on her shoulder and chirped in her ear. Her eyes went distant, as though seeing something else. Then they suddenly snapped back into focus. Frank could tell by the look on her face that it wasn't good news.

"I asked some of the flock to check on Haven," she said softly. "In the time it took us to make it to the Ancestor Tree, it appears that the travelers routed our forces." She glanced at Frank. "As you suspected, it appears Alderas has surrendered. The travelers must have

claimed they took us hostage and pointed to the smoke of the burning meeting lodge as evidence. After we abandoned the position, their Tamers and Growers must have confirmed that we were missing."

"So, they are alive?" Runner asked, a faint glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Some of them at least," Abigail replied. "It appears they have claimed Haven and are using our own homes as a prison. I cannot tell what they plan to do now."

Silence descended upon the group, each lost in their own thoughts as they processed this information.

Frank closed his eyes, trying to keep his breathing steady. It was just one problem on top of another. Silver was dying. Hoot was out of commission. That left only him, Runner, Howl, Abigail, Spider, and a group of children and small animals.

Runner had also been right. It was only a matter of time before the players scouted the tree and Spider's camouflage likely wouldn't protect them for long. The only silver lining was that the players probably wouldn't make it that far tonight, with the sun already sinking below the mountains. But they could sure as hell expect company by tomorrow.

Unless he could come up with something, they were screwed.

Except, he had no idea what to do.

Frank could feel his heart thumping in his chest. He needed to move. To walk. To run. To do *something* – *anything* – except sit here watching Silver die.

He felt a helpless anger well in his chest, his vision tinged crimson like he was viewing the world through blood-tinted glasses. He could feel that same familiar rage overcoming him – the feeling so much more intense than his usual abilities. This was the kind of bloodlust that had led him to rip off a man's arm and stab that player in the eye with his own wand.

His eyes drifted to Silver's prone form, and he felt his heart lurch. There was a whisper in his ear now, insidious and demanding. He could return to Haven. He could kill the trespassers. He could make them pay for what they had done.

He wanted to rend, tear, and destroy.

He wanted to kill.

Frank rose abruptly, the others looking at him in surprise. "I… I need a second. Just to clear my head," he said suddenly, guilt and fear clouding his mind. As he looked at the others, he could see that a faint red aura lingered along their skin. He blinked hard, trying to clear his vision and tamp down on whatever the hell was happening to him.

Howl looked like he wanted to object, but Abigail met his eyes, shaking her head and glancing meaningfully at Silver. "Take some

time then," she said gently. "Our problems won't go anywhere in the meantime."

Frank just nodded and marched off quickly. Once he had put some distance between himself and the remaining residents of Haven, he automatically shifted his legs and his steps transformed to great bounding leaps. He didn't have a particular destination in mind – or a goal. He just needed to be moving – to put some distance between him and the residents of Haven. At least for a moment. He needed to find a way to settle his chaotic thoughts and unwind the knot in his stomach that was making it so difficult to think.

But he knew he was just trying to run away from the thought that kept bouncing through his head. Sophie's words echoed in his mind in an endless loop.

"Is she dying?"

Chapter 28 - Vicarious

Without realizing it, Frank's feet soon took him to the other side of the lake. As he had run along the rocky bank, the sunlight continued to wane. The last of the orange rays glided up the massive gnarled trunk before disappearing in the branches.

He now stood near the base of the Ancestor Tree. Up close, Frank could finally appreciate just how enormous it truly was. Its trunk was at least several hundred yards across. While he hadn't realized this from farther away, the tree also appeared to be rooted around a miniature mountain. The trunk terminated in solid stone before roots the size of school buses peeled away around the massive hunk of earth and speared into the ground.

Frank wound through those same roots, climbing until he was at the base of the stone. He was soon a hundred or so feet above the lake, and he looked back down toward the water. With his *Night Vision*, he had no difficulty picking out the forms of the townsfolk milling around the lake. He could even visualize what they were doing right now.

Sophie was likely helping the other children, who huddled together, hoping that their parents and loved ones were okay – not quite understanding why they were here or what was happening. The animals would be crouched together, growling and cawing at every snapping twig or rustling branch.

Runner and Howl had likely switched places with Spider by now, taking up positions at the entrance to the glade. Spider might be resting along the bank. He may not have fought alongside them, but he had been working nonstop all day. Frank suspected he was likely on the brink of collapse.

And Abigail was likely tending to Silver, hovering over her prone form, trying her best to clean a wound that wouldn't heal, and feeding what few healing potions they had left to a dying woman.

It was all fucking pointless.

Frank knew they were doomed.

He could feel the familiar mixture of rage, pain, and despair curl and coil and slither through his stomach. He couldn't fucking do anything about any of this. He couldn't heal Silver. He couldn't save these people. He couldn't defeat the players. Even if he killed them, they would just come back.

Frank's fists clenched, and he could feel his heartbeat pounding in his ears like an organic drumbeat. He wanted to be able to do

something. Any-fucking-thing to fix this. But he couldn't. To make matters worse, he was responsible for this situation – at least partly. This was just like his battle against Alexion, except worse. Everyone around him died.

And it was his fault. There were so many times where he could have prevented this outcome.

If he had done a better job of convincing the council.

If he had let the demon take what it wanted.

If he had stayed quiet in the Chasm.

If he had simply let himself die in the ice and snow.

If he hadn't left the Twilight Throne in the first place.

If he wasn't so damned useless.

Frank had managed to stay calm and level-headed with the others, but out here, he was losing control. His anger, his rage, and his fear were overwhelming, and he had no outlet. His vision had gone blood red, but not from his normal *Rage*. A voice seemed to whisper in his ear, but its words were inaudible, drowned out by the thump, thump, thump of his own heartbeat.

Frank suddenly slammed his fist against the nearby boulder. His knuckles smashed against the rock, and a dull pain bloomed along the ridges of bone. That small pain felt good – really good. It was something he could focus on amid the chaos.

He punched the rock again.

And again.

And again.

He slammed his fists into the stone, beating at it and giving into his rage. His vision tunneled until all he saw was the rock. Frank heard something – someone – roaring. Its voice echoed over the glade. He could only vaguely register that the sound came from him.

Frank wasn't sure how long he stood there, pounding at the rock. Eventually, he backed away, his chest heaving. Dust filled the air, and broken fragments of stone littered the ground. Notifications were flashing in his peripheral vision. His knuckles throbbed and ached, the pain suddenly registering.

Frank looked down at his hands and saw that at some point he had summoned his *Bear Form*. Despite the enhanced bone and muscle, his knuckles were a mess – a mass of blood and purple bruising. He glanced up at the rock and found that he had carved deep furrows in the stone and a crack now ran the length of the boulder. He could also see his own blood and traces of fur splattered against the rock.

Yet he still felt the helpless rage curdling in veins.

He pulled his fist back to strike the rock again.

"*ENOUGH*," a voice said.

Frank froze. That voice didn't sound human. It sounded like the

grating of boulders. The movement of tectonic plates. It was the peal of thunder amid a hurricane. Each word rattled his bones and set his teeth on edge.

The ground suddenly trembled and shook, Frank listing sideways. He placed a steadying hand on a nearby boulder, watching as the branches of the Ancestor Tree swayed. Leaves rained down around him, twisting and spiraling in the stiff breeze that whisked down from the mountains and swept through the glade.

Frank saw the boulders around him shift and move, and he stumbled backward, trying to place some distance between him and whatever monster he had accidentally summoned.

As he backed up, Frank finally saw what he had woken.

A face stared back at him out of the rocks. Its head was set at the bottom of the Ancestor Tree, as though the miniature mountain at the base of the tree was its body. As Frank looked on, its heavy-lidded eyes opened, the stone peeling away and throwing off sparks that pushed back at the darkness. Its features were angular and sharp, and its eyes were slitted, almost reptilian. They danced in a rainbow of colors. It was like staring into a massive kaleidoscope, the patterns shifting so quickly that it was difficult to focus on them.

Frank's eyes widened in shock, and he felt his mind go numb.

"What… what are you?" Frank managed to croak.

"I am a *dragon*, child of the pack," the monster replied.

Frank was having difficulty shaking off his shock. *This* was a dragon? He had fought a dragon before, or at least he had seen the corpse of the creature he had slain in the Sea's Edge. That thing was a pale imitation of the monster before him. The dragon's body took up most of the glade, his torso curling underneath the Ancestor Tree, as though he were part of the tree itself. He was enormous.

"That thing you saw in the Water God's domain was not a *dragon*. It was a spell and nothing more," the voice thundered.

"True dragons are nature incarnate. We are life itself – the balance and paradox of creation. We are compassion in one hand and destruction in the other. We are the surge of birth and the release of death. We instill life with each breath and take it away with a scratch of our claws."

The words thundered through the air like an avalanche, each one forcing Frank to take a stumbling step backward as though they had a physical force. To make matters worse, he couldn't see where the sound was coming from, and he glanced around in confusion.

Then he suddenly realized he hadn't spoken aloud. He had only been thinking about the other dragon.

Which meant…

"That I can read your mind and speak to you in turn," the

dragon finished for him. “Would you expect anything less after meeting my people?”

“Your people?” Frank asked, having trouble gathering his thoughts with the way the dragon’s mental voice boomed through his mind.

The boulders ground together in what Frank interpreted as irritation. “You think I would let these creatures walk upon my back without my blessing?”

The answer clicked into place, and Frank looked back at what was left of the residents of Haven – their forms merely dark silhouettes in the distance. Did they know what rested here? Did they understand what the Ancestor Tree really was? How could they? Even now, Frank wanted to run from this place. This wasn’t a beast he could defeat. He was staring into the face of a living mountain – a monster that could crush him with a thought.

Frank turned his attention back to the dragon to find his multi-colored eyes staring at him. But this monster hadn’t killed him. Which meant he could reason with him. He sure as hell hoped so, because one stray movement might kill them all.

“My apologies. You are a *real* dragon,” Frank said cautiously, putting up his hands in a placating gesture. “And the residents of Haven are your people.”

“Good. You can see reason, at least when it suits you,” the dragon replied.

Frank cocked his head, a sudden realization occurring to him. Perhaps he was staring at the solution to their problems.

“If these are really your people, then why don’t you help them?” Frank tentatively asked. “They are being slain by travelers that have invaded the valley.”

“You speak as though I am ignorant of what transpires here,” the dragon said, what felt like amusement coloring his voice. “My roots run the length of these mountains. I am the creatures that roam its peaks and settle in its valleys. Nothing that breathes, walks, crawls, and flies across my body may escape my gaze.

“Yet I will not intervene in this dispute.”

“Even to protect *your people*?” Frank demanded, his anger flaring.

“It is not my duty to *protect* them. In fact, it may help to salve your conscience to know that it is I who brought the travelers here. You are not to blame for what has come to pass – however much you might wish to take responsibility.”

“You did what?” Frank asked, anger giving way to confusion.

“Just as I said. I brought about this outcome.”

“You didn’t kill those travelers or sacrifice them to a demon,”

Frank retorted. “And you certainly didn’t let the cultists attack Haven in the first place. Those decisions were made by others.”

“Ahh, perhaps I was not an inciting cause of this attack, but my actions set in motion the events that led to this outcome. I foresaw it long before you stepped foot in the valley, child of the pack.”

Frank just stared back. How could that be possible? How could the dragon have known that he would come to the valley? How could this creature have possibly predicted that his presence would lead to the death of the demon and the endangerment of Haven?

The rocks ground together, throwing off more sparks as the dragon peered at him. “I can see that you do not believe me. You insist on blaming yourself, as though you carry the weight of the world upon your shoulders.

“Let me ask you then, how did the cultists learn our ways? You have gained some knowledge of my people’s gifts, and you have met those fanatics. Do you believe them capable of learning *Communion*?”

Frank was about to answer but hesitated.

Now that he considered it, that didn’t really make sense, although he had never questioned Silver’s story. Alderas letting the Master enter the valley seemed plausible but how had the cultists learned the Shifters’ ways, much less mastered them? Even Frank was struggling with this, and he wasn’t some nutjob trying to cook up a homebrew god.

“I-I don’t know,” he finally answered.

“There is wisdom in being able to admit ignorance,” the dragon replied, his tone not unkind. “The answer is simple. I granted the Master those powers.”

“You did what?” Frank echoed.

“Is that really the question you wish to ask? Take care, child of the pack. The questions we ask – and how we ask them – matter a great deal,” the dragon said, staring at him for a long moment.

Frank sighed in frustration. It felt like the monster was just being obtuse, but he was willing to play along since the creature was the size of a mountain. “No, I guess not. *Why* did you help the cultists?”

“The answer is simple. I did this so that my people might grow *stronger*.”

Frank could only stare at the dragon. “Grow stronger? This is supposed to be helping them to grow stronger?” he gritted out, his anger back in full force as the image of Silver’s wounded form burned in his mind.

“As with all things, hardship does not last forever,” the dragon replied calmly, his mental voice booming in Frank’s mind. “But to understand my goal, you must understand the greater conflict that

takes place in this world. You seek to understand who is responsible for what is happening here? Then look to the *gods*," the dragon hissed, disgust tinging his mental voice.

"They are meddling children, each a poor caricature of *life*. Desire. Happiness. Acceptance. Passion. Peace. Confidence. They are merely parts of a whole, and that whole is *me*. I was here when this world was born, and my breath gave life to everything you now see. They are usurpers. Parasites.

"A long time ago, my creatures pushed the gods from this world. And yet now they return, spreading their insidious magics across the land, corrupting it and warping it to their own purposes. They use this world as their plaything, to amuse themselves before they grow bored. It is *they* who forced my people into hiding, persecuted and hunted them like animals – forcing them to flee to this remote valley.

"Yet the worst sin is that of my own people. They are *content* to hide in this valley – blinded by their own fear and guilt.

"That is *NOT OUR WAY*," the dragon thundered.

The rocks shifted again, and Frank saw multi-colored energy pulse and throb among the boulders, filling the air. The red stood out most vividly to Frank, seeming to overpower everything else and painting the night sky in varying shades of crimson. With that energy came an overwhelming medley of emotions: anger, hope, rage, fear, and longing.

"I am a *dragon* – the last of my kind. We are life itself. And life is a constant struggle, an uphill battle against oblivion. We are thrown into the pit with the rest of creation and are forced to rend, claw, and tear our way towards our goal. We fight over the scraps of this world, and through this process, we become stronger. We grow. We adapt. We *evolve*.

"We do not hide in the darkness, finding our safe and settled corner of the world. That path leads only to extinction."

Those multi-hued eyes bore into Frank even as the crimson energy pushed him to his knees under an avalanche of emotion. Frank could feel something inside of himself responding to that power. It writhed and twisted, echoing the dragon's call – whispering in the back of Frank's mind.

"I set these steps in motion to create conflict. To force my people to adapt, to grow, to gain *power* – to grasp at the strength to reclaim their position in this world."

"What is this?" Frank asked through gritted teeth, trying to block out the blood-red energy and contain whatever was trying to burrow its way out of his mind and body. It was becoming difficult to breathe.

The dragon seemed to hesitate, and the energy abruptly began to recede.

"Your gift, child," the dragon answered shortly. "The same one I gave to the Master and that you took from him by force – as was your right. You harbor a primal spirit, a fragment of a dragon's soul. That is what the Master bound to that tome you found in his lair, shaving off mere pieces to grant his followers the *shift*."

"What the hell does that mean?" Frank gasped, starting to grow tired of the dragon's riddles. He still struggled to concentrate, the shadowy voice raging in the back of his mind now, as though it was throwing itself against some sort of mental cage.

"My gifts come in many shapes. My people embrace them all through the act they know as *Communion*. This encompasses the full range of feeling. They can sense emotions in all other life. Happiness and sadness. Pleasure and pain. Hope and despair.

"But we all harbor something in the dark corners of our soul that is more feral and wild. My Shifters can sense it, they can touch at the edges of it, but they will never quite understand it. It is that tantalizing cocktail of emotion that you cling to when you are pushed beyond your limit – fear, rage, guilt, and despair. It is the strength and fury of a cornered animal, its back to the wall with nothing left to lose.

"I sent out a fragment of my own soul, knowing that it would create conflict and pain for my people. I knew that one day, someone strong enough would claim it and would return to me, called back to my embrace instinctively. This person would lead my people to greatness again, forging our path back into the world.

"They would become a *harbinger of life*.

"Can you not feel it, even now, writhing in your mind, wallowing in your emotions? Have you not noticed the rage – the bloodlust seething in your veins? The ability to sense extreme emotions in others?"

Frank shook his head, trying to grapple with what the dragon was saying. He thought back to the times that had seen the red energy. When he had first fought with Silver in the Chasm. When they had attacked the player camp. During his meeting with the council. When the players had been about to enter the meeting lodge. When Silver was injured. These had all been events involving extreme emotion. Rage. Anger. Guilt. Fear.

Then there was the slinking, shadowy creature that had protected him during his encounter with Palo – when the demon had burrowed through his worst memories. That voice that had seemed to speak with him when he slew the player. It had returned to him again when he had seen Silver fall in battle in a whirlwind of flame and

blood...

Each time he had been backed into a corner – a moment of desperation – not dissimilar to how he had felt on the edge of the lake, watching helplessly as the life slowly fled Silver's body.

Had that been the primal spirit?

"Indeed," the dragon intoned.

"But that was not the reason you came to this valley. You had a question, did you not? A single question that you wanted answered above all else."

Frank stared at the monster in confusion.

"Why you are *corrupted*. Why you cannot advance. Why you cannot grow. Why you are a liability to your friends and a blessing to your enemies. Why you cannot help the wolf girl. Why those around you die. Why even now you scramble up my scales and beat against them feebly. You came here looking for a way to unlock your true potential.

"Does it not gnaw at you even now? I can practically feel it coiling in your gut," the dragon's voice hissed through his mind, almost taunting.

"Ask it. Ask the question."

Frank searched his mind. What was the question?

Then it came to him.

It was a question he had been asking for a long time – much longer than he had been playing AO. It was a question that had first bloomed in the darkest corners of his soul many, many years ago. During school competitions where he watched his siblings alight the stage yet again. In the judgmental looks his parents gave him. In the jeers from his peers. It was the reason he always came in last. Why he struggled even with the help of his friends.

It was the same question he had asked himself continuously over the last few days.

"What… what is wrong with me?" Frank weakly asked.

The stones ground together, throwing off sparks as the dragon's head shifted, his eyes focusing on Frank. They seemed to scour his soul in an instant. The demon's mental foraging had felt like a flashlight in a massive, dark cavern. In contrast, the way the dragon flooded the entire chamber with light all at once was overpowering and all-consuming.

Then the dragon blinked, and it was over.

"The answer is simple. Nothing."

Frank stared back at the monster.

He could feel his confusion warping to anger. Nothing? Nothing was wrong with him? He had gone through all of *this* for that bullshit answer?

“Really?” Frank demanded, speaking without thinking. “Nothing is wrong with me? Is that why I’m afraid to fight? Is that why I seem to fail my friends and the people I care about. Is that why Silver is fucking dying right now, and children huddle around your body, crying for their parents?”

He could feel the same red glow settle over his vision, and this time, Frank did nothing to try to suppress it. He embraced it. How dare this dragon sit here and feed him this crap! Especially when he had failed his own damn people!

“You know what I think? I think it is you who is fucking scared,” Frank said, stabbing a finger at the beast, screaming at the living mountain before him. “I think it is you who is hiding in this valley. You have grown so fat and lazy that a gods-damned tree grew from your back. You sit here and talk in riddles and play games – claiming to help your people. But you do *nothing* as they are slaughtered and cry out for your help.

“Instead of taking your own damn advice – fighting for your own survival among these other gods – you do what? Send out for a mail-order savior? You think I’m some sort of messiah of life? I am *nothing*. I am a fat kid who fails everyone around him.

“You have failed them. Just as *I* have.”

The dragon stared back at him, his eyes swirling. Frank’s chest was heaving, and his hands were clenched into fists, his nails cutting into his own palms. Yet he didn’t sense any emotion from the beast.

Then he felt the boulders grind together, the dragon’s laugh rumbling through the glade to the scrape of rock and a shower of sparks. “I have chosen well. Not many would dare speak to me that way.

“Yet you are still blind, child of the pack. You cannot see what is sitting right in front of your face. I have acted for my people, and my actions have already reaped rewards. You have the power to accomplish what you want, to save those you love. To lead these people to reach their true potential – just as you will recognize your own.

“You need only *grasp* it.”

Frank just snorted in derision, his anger lending him strength.

“You know what, fuck you and fuck this,” Frank shouted at the monster. “You are useless. Sit here and laugh at me – laugh at their pain.” He gestured at the other side of the lake. “And when your people perish, and the gods rule this world, know that it will be your own fucking fault!”

With that, Frank turned on his heel and sprinted down the boulders, heading for the lake. He didn’t bother to spare a glance behind him or wait for the dragon’s response. He simply ran, his anger

surging through his veins in crashing waves.

Yet, the dragon's laughter followed him, the boulders grinding together and sparks igniting all around Frank. "Run then, little sapling, run toward your destiny. I will give you one last blessing to aid you in your fight. I will shed some light on you in the hope that you will finally blossom."

"I do not want your blessing! I don't want anything from you!" Frank shouted, sprinting forward.

"I told you already, I am nature. The endless tides. The swirling tornado. The raging storm. You cannot run. You cannot hide. You can only accept it. Embrace it."

Frank felt a massive surge of energy growing behind him.

He spared a glance over his shoulder and froze, his padded feet skidding across the stones. A rainbow of color welled from the dragon's head, yet the crimson energy swiftly overshadowed the other colors, as though he could only see that spectrum of light. The energy swept forward in an expanding wave that crashed across the glade. It raced through the air – far faster than Frank could run. Within only a heartbeat, it passed through him, the energy causing his skin to tingle and his blood to boil.

Frank felt the shadowy creature in his mind crashing against the bars of its mental cage with renewed vigor, as though the dragon was feeding it energy directly – egging it on. It tore and scratched at Frank's mind until he finally felt *something* snap. It felt like a pressure in his soul had been released.

All at once, the world stilled, and the blood-red light faded.

"Return to me when you are ready, child of the pack. When you have seen this world. When you have grown in power. When you finally understand the gods' deceit." The mental voice was only a whisper now, receding swiftly.

With this final statement, Frank was left standing alone atop a boulder. The dragon's eyes had closed, and his power had vanished. Leaves fell all around him as he stared at the dark trunk of the Ancestor Tree. There was nothing but the sound of the wind whistling across the rocks and the murmur of small animals lingering along the tree's branches. If not for the scratches on his palms and the fresh blood staining his skin, he would have challenged whether the exchange had been real.

"Fuck you," Frank muttered.

And then he turned away.

Chapter 29 - Reflective

Only a few minutes later, Frank dropped to his knees by the side of the lake and ran his hands through the cool water, splashing some on his face to try to clear his thoughts. His eyes drifted to the far end of the lake where he knew the residents of Haven lingered. His emotions still roiled at a dull simmer as he stewed on the dragon's words. To make matters worse, he still didn't know how to help Silver or the rest of the survivors.

He had no idea what to do. He was still weak and helpless. Silver was still dying. Their enemies still outnumbered them. And he was sitting here by the lakeside wallowing in his own guilt, anger, and weakness. He could only laugh as he recalled the dragon's answer to his question.

There was nothing wrong with him? Really?

Frank's laughter cut off abruptly as the water of the lake shifted and bent, spilling up into the air until it formed two blobs of moisture. He stumbled backward quickly and retook his feet, automatically transforming his hands as he prepared for an attack.

What the hell is this? Frank had reached his limit and was ready to kill whatever mystical bullshit tried to accost him next.

Before Frank's eyes, the two blobs of water filled out and grew more solid, forming what appeared to be arms and legs. The water expanded with each passing second and fingers soon rested at the end of each hand. Then the dark, muddy water shifted, turning into peach-colored flesh and sturdy clothing, the details swiftly resolving into focus.

When the transformation was over, two impossible young men stood on the surface of the lake, staring back at him. Frank's mouth moved, but no sound came out.

These strangers were eerily familiar. It was like staring into a mirror.

They *were* him – yet different.

One version of him was grotesquely overweight as though he had gained another two hundred pounds, rolls of fat rippling from his waist. His neck had practically merged with his chin, and Frank couldn't help but wonder how he could walk. His skin was a hodge-podge of acne and eczema. The untarnished patches of flesh looked pale white as though he never ventured outside. He wore a familiar old t-shirt riddled with food stains that marred its surface. This version of Frank cringed away from him, uncertain and fearful.

The other was a stark contrast. His body was covered in thick ropes of muscle, and he stood straight and tall. His hair was perfectly trimmed and styled, and he wore an immaculate and stylish suit. He looked freaking awesome. He also didn't shy away from Frank's eyes. If anything, he seemed to be sizing him up, looking at Frank from head to toe.

"What is going on?" Frank – the real Frank – muttered.

Shadows pooled across the water and grew into an amorphous blob of dark energy. As Frank watched this strange creature, its body condensed and grew but never took a complete form. He only got a sense of slashing claws and razor-sharp teeth amid the dense cloud of dark energy. The only distinct feature the creature had were its eyes; they glowed a solid crimson as they stared back at Frank.

"We are you, and you are us," the creature answered, its voice a slithering whisper.

Frank cocked his head. He knew this creature, and he recognized that voice. He had seen this same shadowy monster when the demon had invaded his mind, and he had felt it ever since, lingering in the back of his head like a parasite.

"I know what *you* are," Frank said, recalling the dragon's words. "You are the primal spirit." He could only guess that the dragon's parting *gift* had been to free the spirit from whatever cage had previously kept it bound. Frank ground his teeth together in frustration.

The creature let out a whispering laugh. "*We* are the primal spirit. You are me, and I am you, and we are one."

"No, we aren't," Frank shot back. "You are the fragment of an asshole dragon's soul that has been piggybacking inside of me."

"Tsk tsk, we really shouldn't talk to our self that way," the spirit said, waving a shadowy appendage. To Frank's horror, the two doppelgangers waved the same way, silently reprimanding him.

"What do you want?" Frank gritted out. He was growing tired of games.

"A test of self," was the simple answer.

Frank just barked out a harsh laugh. He had no idea what that meant, but he had better things to do than get mocked by some sort of spirit, especially after his irritating exchange with the dragon. He turned to walk away.

"Do we not want to grow stronger?" the spirit asked, its voice barely a whisper as though it were speaking right beside Frank's ear. He resisted the urge to flinch away. "Do we not want the power to save our wolf girl? To slay the travelers? To protect these people?"

Frank froze. How could he really say no to that? Yet it was difficult to tell if this was just another trick. Could this spirit really

deliver on those promises? On the other hand, what the hell did he really have to lose?

He turned around slowly.

"Yes, I do want those things," Frank answered.

"Then we will take the test together," the spirit hissed. It had returned to its spot above the lake. Or perhaps it had never moved.

"What test?"

"We must learn to *accept*," the creature answered.

"Accept what? Speak plainly, spirit," Frank grunted, growing frustrated.

"We are all that is present," the creature answered, waving another shadowy appendage at the doppelgangers and Frank.

"I am not those two," Frank said, gesturing at both the fat and stylish versions of himself.

"But we fear to be this one," the shadow said, suddenly appearing behind Fat Frank. That version jumped away, cowering almost comically above the water – like some sort of terrified slug of a person.

"And we wish to be this one," the shadow continued, appearing behind Hot Frank. That version simply raised a skeptical eyebrow as he met Frank's gaze.

The shadowy creature disappeared. Then what felt like a claw pressed gently along his neck. He had to force himself not to move as it dragged across his skin. "And we feel bad for wanting this," the shadow whispered. "We feel guilty for the darkness in our own soul – the collection of anger and pain that others heap on us. The emotions we push deep, deep down inside. Yet when we finally let ourselves fly free, the world bends to *our* will."

Suddenly, the image of dead bodies appeared in front of Frank's eyes. A player with his arm ripped off. Another with a wand stabbed into his skull. A third whose ribcage jutted out from his torso. His face was almost unrecognizable. Blood stained each scene, painting the corpses a brilliant crimson.

Frank felt a strange medley of emotions as these images flashed across his mind's eye. He felt triumph, revenge, strength, and purpose. He had felt no hesitation in making those kills. He had just acted.

More than that, he had *enjoyed* it. The sense of power he had felt as he crushed those other players had been exhilarating.

But he also couldn't deny the pain he had caused. What had that felt like from the other person's perspective? To have your arm ripped off or a wand impale your eye? Was that any better than what the druids had done to Liam and his men by feeding them to the demon? Or how the cultists had betrayed the people of Haven? Even now, he could feel guilt coil in his gut.

"We don't have to feel this way, though," the shadow said, appearing once again in front of Frank and resting a claw to his stomach. "We can let this go. We can give up our fear, our longing, and our guilt. We do not need to hide ourselves. We can simply *be*."

The shadow flashed forward until its glowing red eyes hovered only inches away from Frank. "If we accept us, if we embrace our self, we will grow in power. We will be *strong*," the shadow hissed. "We can save our wolf girl. We can slay the travelers. We can help our friends. We will know no limits. Our claws will carve a new path for us, and our enemies will tremble in fear."

"I… I can't," Frank said. "We should be worried about becoming that thing," he said, pointing at the grotesque version of himself. "And we should want to become that – to improve ourselves." He pointed at his good-looking self. He locked eyes with the spirit. "And we should feel guilty for hurting those other people."

"Why?" the spirit asked simply as though it was confused. "What is wrong with just us as we are?" It gestured at the water of the lake and Frank saw his own reflection staring back, no fat jowls, or stylish suit, or insidious spirit.

"I…" Frank was about to answer but stopped.

He suddenly realized he wasn't sure what to say.

Why should he be so afraid of failure? Of being a fat slob? Had it really done him any good? Had it changed anything? And did striving to be some sort of impossible ideal help him *right now*? Did it make him feel any better? He wasn't going to be that guy in the suit, and he wasn't even entirely sure he *wanted* to be.

He looked at the spirit. Should he feel guilty for killing the players? They had tried to kill him. They had tried to hurt Silver. They would have done far worse. Perhaps he only felt bad for how good it had felt to finally let go. To finally claim what he wanted. For once to put someone else at his mercy instead of being manipulated and pressured and backed into a corner – whether emotionally or physically.

"What is wrong with just us?" the spirit insisted, moving even closer until its red eyes filled his vision. "Answer us."

Frank could recall the dragon's words vividly.

He had rejected the answer when the dragon had said it. Yet now, confronted by the primal spirit, he saw what the dragon might have meant.

"Nothing," Frank murmured.

"We didn't hear us," the shadow taunted.

"Nothing," Frank said more forcefully, raising his eyes to meet the shadow's.

And, for the first time, he meant it.

“Perfect,” the spirit purred. “Then let us clean house.”

In a flash, the spirit was behind the fat version of Frank. It drew a shadowy claw across the doppelganger’s neck, blood jetting from the wound and spilling out across the water. The good-looking version of Frank looked over in horror, turning to run, but it was too late. The spirit had moved across the lake in an instant. With one clean strike, he lopped the stylish Frank’s head from his shoulders, and the headless body crashed into the water.

Then the spirit was in front of Frank once more.

He knew a brief moment of indecision, but it swiftly washed away. He saw no threat as he stared into the spirit’s blood-red eyes. Instead, he saw pain, rage, and fear. He saw the emotions he had locked away behind those doors in his mind – the same doors that the demon had ripped open one-by-one. He realized then that the demon had actually done him a favor. It had weakened the primal spirit’s cage.

As he met the shadowy creature’s eyes, he felt no fear.

Why should he be afraid?

They were one, after all.

He was *Frank*.

With that thought, the spirit rushed toward him, the dark energy seeping into Frank’s body. Every cell seemed to come alive, thrumming in soft harmony. Energy surged through his veins. It felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He felt strangely at peace in a way that he couldn’t easily describe. It was as though his thoughts suddenly had a unified and singular purpose – no longer at war with themselves.

He felt content.

And then something else happened.

A fire lit in his stomach. It started as a single itching flame, but the burning sensation soon grew until Frank dropped to his knees, clutching at his abdomen. The fire didn’t stop there. It spread, surging through his body in a river of molten lava, streaking up and down his arms and legs until it reached the tips of his fingers and his toes.

He began to change and morph and grow – yet he hadn’t summoned the *shift*. His legs inverted with a sickening pop, and thick hair grew along his skin. The change didn’t stop there. The muscles in his chest and stomach spasmed, expanding with each contraction. Ropelike muscles swam up and down his arms as the limbs stretched well beyond their regular length. His fingers snapped and cracked, even as his nails elongated.

The *shift* reached his head, and Frank knew a brief moment of panic.

He couldn’t control this, and he couldn’t stop it.

He could only accept it – let it pass through him.

The muscles in his neck twisted painfully, and he shouted out. But the cry came out garbled as his jaw unhinged and the bones broke, and stretched, and reformed. Then his vision darkened, and blindness overtook him. It felt like someone was driving picks into his eyes and straight into his brain. He almost lost consciousness.

Then, mercifully, it ended.

When Frank opened his eyes again, it took a moment for him to adjust. The world suddenly stood out in vivid color. It was as though his *Night Vision* had undergone a radical improvement. The area around him stood out as stark as day.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, his gaze sweeping across the lake. On the other side, dozens of pinpricks of crimson light were visible. As Frank focused on the lights, he realized that they were people, a blood-red aura enveloping each one. Some were almost invisible while others stood out like floodlights. Instinctively, he knew that this light represented extreme emotions; those that were afraid or despaired for their loved ones stood out more brightly.

Frank reached out a hand toward the light and hesitated. His arm wasn't his own. It was longer than he remembered, the flesh covered in dense black fur. He felt at the hair with his other hand, noting that massive claws now stretched from his fingers. He felt iron-like muscle rippling beneath his own flesh.

Then he glanced down. The same dark fur covered his entire body. He was still humanoid, that much was certain, but now his entire body appeared wolf-like. He shambled to his feet, stumbling for a moment. The rocks around him felt smaller, and it took him a moment to realize that it was because he was taller. At least two or three feet by his guess.

There was only one last thing to check, and yet he hesitated, his enhanced eyes focusing on the water of the lake.

"*Let us see ourselves*," a voice hissed in the back of Frank's mind.

He followed its direction, stepping over to the bank of the river and dropping to his knees. He stared into the water, yet a different creature stared back.

The skin of Frank's face was now covered in dense black hair, and his head and jaw had elongated. He had a snout now, a wolf-like nose resting at the end. His jaw felt strange. It opened too far, and his tongue felt more flexible than it had before. Running it along ridged, sharp teeth, he felt the fangs of a predator.

Despite the changes, it was the eyes that stared back at him that were the most unnerving, glowing an ominous dull crimson. They were the eyes of a beast – of a killer.

They were Frank's eyes.

"*We are finally us*," the voice hissed in the back of his head.

Before he could question the spirit, a cascade of notifications crashed down in front of Frank, obscuring his sight.

Hidden Class Change: Primal Shifter

You have discovered that the book you found in the dungeon north of Peccavi held the fragment of a dragon's soul – a primal spirit. Over time, you have broken down the barrier between yourself and the spirit, finally accepting the fragment of the dragon's soul as part of yourself. You are now one. You are unified.

You have become something more than the residents of Haven. You are not merely a Shifter. You are a creature of rage, of hunger, of claw and fang. You are a representation of life as it tore its way out of the primordial ooze – primal and feral. As your forebears did, you consume other life to feed yourself, powering both your body and your abilities, allowing you to evolve far beyond your prey.

Your enemies will flee before you, and you will crush their skulls between your claws. For you are now a force of nature itself!

+60 Vitality
+60 Endurance
+50 Strength
+50 Dexterity
Full shifts unlocked.
Evolved animal forms unlocked.
New shifting abilities unlocked

"*This is my blessing, child of the pack. Now go out into the world. Grow and evolve. Gain power for yourself. And when you are ready, return to me, and we will shake this world to its very roots*." – Dragon of Life

Shift Form: Werewolf

Level 1	Level 2
+10% Speed	+20% Speed
+10% DMG	+10% DMG
+10% END	+10% END
+10% DMG	+10% DMG

Eyes of the Hunt

60 Stamina/Second (Scaling)
Total integration 100%. Limbs unlocked 4/4.

New Skill: Bloodlust
Your rage skill has been replaced with *Bloodlust*. You will still earn the normal benefits of Rage, but each kill now returns a percentage of your health and stamina. You are a beast of primal fury, and that rage cannot be stopped or contained.
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 4
Effect 1: 16.5% damage increase.
Effect 2: -13% stamina drain.
Effect 3: Kills return 10% of your health and stamina.

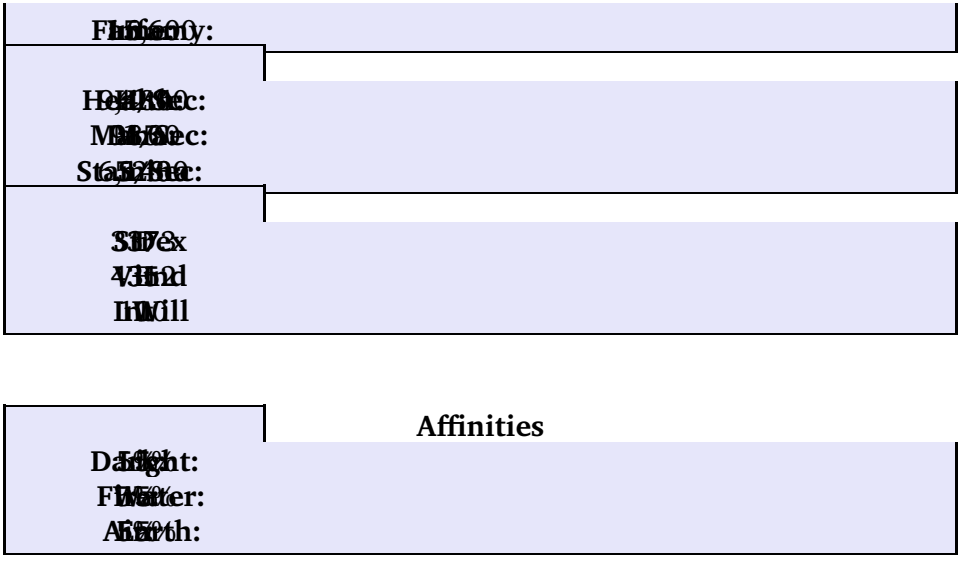
New Skill: Eyes of the Hunt
Your sensitivity to emotional extremes now allows you to detect those emotions in others and to visualize those emotions as a crimson aura. More intense emotions shall result in a brighter aura. Make them fear the whisper in the darkness, the click of claws against stone, and then hunt them down and rip them limb from limb.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect 1: 5% increased sensitivity.

New Skill: Primal Companion
The Dragon of Life has bestowed you with a fragment of his soul. While you have accepted this spirit into yourself, its power is too great for it to be fully absorbed. It is, by its nature, separate, wild, and free. The spirit will remain semi-sentient, capable of giving you advice and instruction. This skill will not level normally, and you will need to discover ways to enhance its abilities and unlock its full gifts.

Frank was struggling to absorb the full import of these changes. It seemed that he had unlocked a new class – or finally discovered his true class. It was difficult to tell. He had also finally unlocked his full *Wolf Form*. Or he supposed he should call it his *Werewolf Form* now.

Curious, he pulled up his Character Status:

Character Status



"Holy shit," Frank muttered. He jumped slightly, startled by the foreign sound that echoed through the air before realizing that it had come from him. His voice was now more guttural and deeper, more growl than actual speech.

Shaking his head, he swiped away his screens. His gaze fixed on his hands where his arms extended in front of him. He still had opposable thumbs, even though massive claws now extended from his fingers. Looking down, he could also see that he stood on his hind legs. He was a wolf and yet he wasn't. He was something different – something *corrupted*.

"*No, we are something better*," the same voice hissed in the back of his mind. "*We are something new. We have evolved.*"

Frank's eyes widened, and he felt at the edges of the creature that lingered in his mind. He could almost sense its shadowy claws and fangs. It seemed he had a permanent mental house guest now. The spirit had fully sprung its cage.

"*We almost seem upset*," the spirit said, amusement coloring its voice. "*We should not worry about this. We have other matters to attend to*."

A pulse of red light flashed in the corner of Frank's vision as the spirit highlighted the survivors of Haven on the other side of the lake. "*Let us go. We have much work to do before this night ends.*"

Frank couldn't really argue with that. Besides, he was interested to see how this new body performed. He shot off at a sprint, the wind racing past him and his legs skimming the surface of the stones with an effortless grace. He bent instinctively as he ran, using his arms to help spring himself forward and scale the rocks that

lingered around the lake.

Then he leaped, the jump sending him hurtling twenty feet into the air before he realized it. Yet he landed with a soft thump, barely losing his balance or momentum. He could feel his blood pumping through his veins, filled with a near-bottomless energy. His muscles felt springy and light.

It was as though he had been crawling for months, and suddenly, he could walk – no, sprint! He felt complete – like a hole had been filled in both his body and his soul. It was in that moment that Frank fully accepted the spirit's whispered words.

A new creature had been born to this world.

And its name was Frank.

Chapter 30 - United

Frank slipped out of the shadows, his *Werewolf Form* melting away almost seamlessly. He had approached the camp of refugees near the eastern edge where he knew that Silver rested. Already, he could make out her prone form. Abigail sat nearby, slumped against the rock with her eyes closed – fast asleep.

Once Frank's newfound excitement at his transformation had worn off, only one thing had occupied his thoughts.

Silver.

He stepped up to her quietly, his fingers tracing the fine white fur that covered her arms. Her eyes moved rapidly beneath her lids, and a fine sheen of sweat coated her skin. In the time he had been gone, her wound hadn't closed. If anything, the insidious green algae had only grown until it now surrounded the gaping wound.

"*We can help her,*" the spirit whispered in the back of his mind.

"Frank?" Abigail murmured. She rose to her feet, wiping at her eyes sleepily. Then she looked at him – really looked at him. Frank felt a whisper of energy pass over him like a spiderweb. Her eyes widened in shock as she stared at him.

"What happened to you? You feel… different," she said softly. Herbert glared at him from nearby, his little teeth bared and his eyes glowing black.

Frank was unsure how to explain what had happened. He didn't feel alarmed at the concern in Abigail's eyes or the hint of judgment he saw there. Those things might have bothered him before, but he found it much easier to shrug them off now for some reason.

As the spirit had said, there were more important problems.

"I had a chance to rest and find my center again," Frank replied slowly. This was technically the truth. Putting aside his encounter with the damnable dragon and the primal spirit that had taken up a permanent residence in his head, he did feel more at peace with himself.

Frank heard steps behind him.

"*Two approach. A Shifter and a Grower,*" the shadowy creature hissed.

He didn't miss the way that Abigail seemed to cock her head, as though she had almost heard something. She took a cautious step away from him, looking nervous and uncertain.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Howl demanded, stalking toward Frank. "We heard noises coming from the tree and assumed

your dumb ass had managed to fall off a mountain or something."

Frank looked back at the man impassively, unaffected by his anger. Spider stood with him, and the stoic Grower gave Frank a curt nod. Although, like Abigail, he seemed to sense that something was off. It was the way he peered at Frank curiously, and his fingers twined together, as though he was holding himself back from summoning his plants.

"Like I told Abigail, I needed a moment to myself," Frank replied calmly. "I guess you could say I blew off some steam." His gaze shifted back to Silver, and he pressed a gentle hand to her head, stroking her hair, unconcerned that the others had witnessed the gesture.

"What the hell does that mean?" Howl began. "What are you doing?"

Frank ignored him, the voices bleeding away as he focused on Silver.

How do I help her? Frank thought.

"*You must give her your heart,*" the spirit whispered back.

Before Frank had even realized it, a thought bubbled to the surface.

She already has it.

That surprised him. Why had he had so much trouble admitting that before?

"*Not that one. We are a lovesick puppy, but we must focus,"* the spirit hissed. *"We must give her the other heart. The one we took from the rainbow-eyed demon – the same one that first weakened our cage.*"

Frank's hand hovered over his pocket, feeling the cloth-covered lump there. He could still recall the prompt for the heart. It had warned him the crystal would come with a cost –a big one. Indecision suddenly wracked his mind. What would be the price?

"*It cannot be greater than death*," the spirit whispered. "*We do not have much time*."

Frank could see that the shadowy creature was right. Silver's breathing was becoming labored. She was in a bad state. He swallowed his doubt. He couldn't afford to hesitate – not right now.

He pulled the package from his pocket, and gingerly peeled away the cloth. The rainbow-hued crystal was soon exposed to the night air, glowing softly.

"What are you doing with the demon's heart?" Howl demanded, stepping between Frank and Silver, despite Spider's attempts to stop him.

Frank could feel anger flare in his chest. Howl was standing in the way of Silver's life. "Move," he said shortly. "This can still save her."

“I’m not moving an inch,” Howl retorted, growling softly. “I’m not letting another *traveler* harm our people. Do you even know what that would do to her? Or how to use it?”

Frank echoed the spirit’s words. “Could it be worse than death?”

Howl hesitated, but then his resolve hardened. “I don’t know, but I’m still not letting you touch her.”

“Then I will make you move,” Frank snarled.

There was no telltale glimmer to signal his *shift*. Frank’s arm just immediately transformed, snatching at Howl’s throat and lifting him from his feet. The man struggled in his grip, his feet flailing at the air, and his eyes bulging in surprise. Frank simply tossed him aside, sending him hurtling a few yards away.

Then he moved quickly.

In a single fluid motion, Frank plucked at the crystal with two claws, stepped toward Silver, and plunged the gem into the open wound, pushing it deep inside her chest. She grunted and writhed on the rock, moaning in her sleep. A mixture of pus and the sickly-green substance leaked from the gash in her side.

“You will kill her, you idiot,” Howl shouted, suddenly back on his feet. Spider and Abigail were trying to hold him back, but Frank could see the misgiving on their faces. They doubted too, but they were willing to give him a chance.

“*Now give her your blood*,” the spirit hissed.

Frank obliged. He moved his unshifted arm above Silver’s mouth. With a quick jerk, he drew a clawed finger across his wrist, opening a bloody gash. Then he held his arm above Silver’s mouth, pressing at his own flesh until his blood dribbled into her mouth. Crimson droplets splashed across her lips before funneling down into her mouth.

Silver swallowed weakly.

Frank held his breath, watching her.

Please work. Please, fucking work.

Silver moaned and then her eyes fluttered open slightly. She seemed to sense Frank’s wrist and struggled toward it, but she was too weak to move. So, he happily helped her. He pressed the open wound to her mouth and felt her lips clamp around his skin. She sucked feebly, drinking his blood. At the same time, he noticed that his mana was beginning to fall. She was feeding on it, his blood acting as a vessel for what little mana his body held.

Each time she swallowed, Silver seemed to gain strength. He could see the wound in her side beginning to close, the green algae disappearing as the flesh repaired itself. He felt her hand wrap around his arm and pull him closer. Her sharp teeth sunk into his skin, trying

to find more of his blood. Frank saw with some alarm that his mana was now dropping at an incredible pace, and weakness suddenly racked his body.

"*Enough, pull away*," the spirit whispered.

But the wound hadn't closed completely. He could give her a little more.

He felt Silver drawing out his blood more quickly now. Her eyes shot open, and they glowed a vivid, vibrant sapphire. It was almost like she was in some sort of fugue, hungrily feeding on Frank's blood. He was out of mana, and Silver was starting to drain his health at a frightening rate.

"*Pull away*!" the shadow shouted in his mind.

Frank finally did as he was asked. He yanked his arm free.

Silver's eyes were wide and wild now as she looked around her, searching for more mana – for more blood. She sat up abruptly, her lips and chin stained red, and her sharp teeth coated a dark crimson. Then she hesitated, placing a hand to her chest as a confused, pained expression warped her face.

All at once, Silver let out a howl of pain, falling to the grass. Frank moved to help her, but the spirit hissed at him to stand still. As he looked on, Silver groaned in the grass, her body undergoing a rapid transformation. The patches of hair on her body darkened and spread, turning a dark obsidian with silver still streaking the fur. She cried out as her canines grew, becoming even more pronounced and sharper. Her limbs contorted painfully as she convulsed, and her nails grew longer.

After only a few seconds, the tremors stopped, and Silver sat up slowly, blinking her sapphire eyes in confusion. She looked down at her hands, surprised to see the black fur that now extended along her forearms. Then Silver finally noticed the group staring at her, a mixture of horror and awe clouding their faces.

Sanity began to return to Silver's eyes, and she shook her head as though trying to clear her thoughts. "What…?" she croaked, her voice hoarse and raspy. She grabbed at her neck, massaging the painful flesh before continuing. "What happened?"

She looked down at her hands again, seeing the blood staining her skin. She felt at her chin and then stared at the fingers that came away thick with the soupy substance. Frank noticed the way she almost had to physically force herself not to lick the blood from her fingers – instead, just staring at it hungrily.

Silver's gaze shot to Frank, seeing the bite marks in his wrist and the slowly closing wound in his arm. "What did you do?" she asked, horror in her voice.

"I saved your life," Frank replied calmly. "I gave you the

demon's heart. You earned it. It was yours by kill."

"You did what?" Silver demanded, anger and confusion dancing in her startling blue eyes. She jumped to her feet and stalked toward Frank. "You did what!?" she growled at him again.

"I saved your life," he repeated, unperturbed by her anger. "You were dying. The travelers who attacked you used poison. You weren't responding to healing potions, and we are in no position to return to Haven right now to get medicine." Frank gestured at the sleeping forms of the nearby children to emphasize his point. The commotion had woken more than a few, dozens of eyes now staring at Silver's bloody, transformed body.

"The demon's heart must let you feed on mana to heal yourself," Frank continued. "That's my best guess, anyway."

"You did… what am…" Silver seemed to be struggling to pull her thoughts together, staring at her hands. Then she looked at Frank, and her eyes flashed angrily again – her gaze accusing. "You did this to me. You *corrupted* me."

She stalked toward him, shoving him hard. Yet Frank made no move to protect himself. "I did what I had to do," was all he said. He wanted to say more. To explain how he couldn't lose her, but he knew she wouldn't hear it – not right now anyway.

Silver looked like she was about to scream at him or pull him apart limb-by-limb, but she was interrupted before she got a chance. "Ana!" a voice cried. Sophie came dashing through the sleeping forms and leaped on her sister, wrapping her arms around Silver, completely indifferent to the blood or the changes that had ravaged her body.

"H-hi, little one," Silver said, stroking her head and her gaze softening.

"I was so worried, even though Frank told me not to be," Sophie said, her tear-streaked eyes searching Silver's face. "But he told the truth. He told me he would save you no matter what it took. And here you are!"

Silver looked away from her sister, meeting Frank's eyes. The anger had faded slightly, but he still saw fear and confusion there. And something else that he was struggling to identify, even with his newfound abilities. However, her gaze conveyed one clear message.

This conversation wasn't over, it had only been delayed.

* * *

The group gave Silver a moment to recover and wash the blood from her face and clean her armor and clothing.

Silver also used this time to calm her younger sister. At first, Sophie was nearly beside herself, and then she was immensely curious as to why her sister was now covered in black fur and appeared to drink blood. However, there was never any fear in Sophie's eyes as she looked at Silver.

Frank couldn't say the same for the others. He saw more than one child shy away from Silver as she passed – a fact that didn't go unnoticed by the transformed Shifter. The rest of the hunting pack also kept eyeing her carefully, as though she might attack them in search of another snack.

After Silver had finally managed to convince Sophie to go back to sleep, she rejoined the group. The hunting pack had regrouped near the rock where Silver had been lying for the last few hours. Hoot was present, but the man simply sat slumped against another boulder – his eyes vacant. Silver didn't talk to Frank or address him. Instead, she posed questions to the others, asking them to report on what had happened since the battle in the meeting lodge.

Abigail and Howl filled Silver in on the situation, although there wasn't much to tell. They explained how Alderas' forces had apparently surrendered and were now being held as captives back in Haven. They also revealed their precarious position. They were hidden – at least for now, but that would likely only last until tomorrow.

A heavy silence now hung over the group. Frank noticed the way that Silver kept watching him out of the corner of her eye when she thought he wasn't looking. Her fingers also kept tracing the patch of skin at her side – the flesh now mended and whole. She looked conflicted, as though unsure whether she wanted to stab him or thank him.

Not that he could really blame her. She hadn't had time to truly appreciate how the demon's heart had changed her or consider what she had become. Frank could certainly sympathize, especially after tonight. Yet he was accustomed to being the outsider. Silver wasn't. He had noticed how the others were more cautious around her, as though afraid she might try to eat them. It was the same wary respect they showed Frank after he had tossed Howl like a sack of potatoes.

A lot had changed in a single evening.

But none of that was important. Frank could deal with Silver's anger, and she would learn to adapt. She was one of the strongest women he had ever met. She could face this challenge. She was alive. That was all that mattered.

And, for now, they had bigger problems.

"Well, we're screwed," Howl muttered, closing his eyes and rubbing at his neck.

"We could try to go over the mountains," Silver suggested.

“Maybe flee outside the valley, find a safe place for the children, and then come back as a smaller group to try to rescue the others.”

“Assuming there’s anything to come back to by then,” Howl murmured. “We don’t know what the travelers plan to do with the captives.”

“And that also assumes we can get this group over the mountains,” Abigail added quietly. She glanced at Spider. “With most of the Growers in Haven, this would be possible. With just Spider… I’m not sure many of the children would make it. More will die, certainly.”

Another pause as the group mulled on this.

“*This is weakness,*” the shadowy voice hissed. “*We do not run. We fight!*”

Okay, but how? Frank thought back, tiredly.

“*We strike where the travelers are weak. We rip, claw, rend, and tear,*” the voice whispered back, as though this was obvious.

Frank had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. The spirit was useful, but it only seemed to have one approach to dealing with a problem. It fed him images of eyes, guts, and fleshy joints – weak points on an animal. It didn’t seem to realize that the players would just come back from the dead. Their bodies weren’t their weakness.

“*Then what is?*” the voice demanded stubbornly.

Frank hesitated at that question. Players usually only cared about a few things. Their loot. Experience. Levels. Their character…

Frank’s eyes widened. He was staring at the Ancestor Tree that loomed over the glade, the occasional leaf fluttering in the wind. He had discarded the tree as an option before. The people of Haven had claimed its ability to permanently destroy a traveler was a legend. That option had been too risky – with too many unknowns. Besides, how could a tree destroy a traveler?

But now he understood. That wasn’t a tree. It was a dragon – a *real* dragon. It might have that power. That was the sort of thing that would strike fear into the players’ hearts. They might not even need to kill them all. Just set an example with a few before the others were convinced to flee the valley. At least, it was *possible*. Which was better than anything else they had to work with right now.

“*Ahh, we bury the travelers below the father, and he shall consume them,*” the spirit hissed, echoing his tentative plan. “*Then we will kill the rest as they flee before us!*”

The only question was whether they needed to be alive or not.

“*The father is life. He controls it and bends it to his will. The state of the vessel does not matter,*” the spirit whispered in response to Frank’s unspoken question.

His eyes widened. In that case, they might have a chance –

corpses were much easier to haul around than living players. “That could work,” Frank murmured. He could feel the spirit’s bloodlust, and it sang with the desire for vengeance that lingered in his own heart.

“What would? Why are you muttering to yourself?” Howl demanded, glaring at him. The Shifter clearly hadn’t forgotten how Frank had manhandled him.

“I think I have a plan,” Frank suddenly said, taking his feet and pacing into the center of the group. “Instead of running, what if we strike at the travelers instead?”

The others stared at him incredulously.

“If used properly, a small force can be more powerful than an army,” Frank insisted. Jason had demonstrated that on more than one occasion. “Many of the travelers will have returned to their world during the evening. We only need to kill the guards and then destroy the travelers as they log back in. They will be off balance and confused – easy prey.”

“But won’t they simply respawn at the entrance to the valley once they die?” Abigail asked.

“Not if we take the bodies and bury them below the Ancestor Tree,” Frank replied, his eyes flashing in the darkness.

The group went suddenly silent, mulling on this. None of them immediately rejected the idea. Even Howl was chewing on the strategy, as though trying to come up with some flaw in the plan. Frank just needed to convince them.

“Spider could remain here to help dig the graves,” Frank continued, pointing at the stoic man. “Runner and Howl can protect the glade and ferry the corpses back to the tree. And Silver and I can hunt the travelers.”

Silver was finally looking at him squarely now, her sapphire eyes glowing in the darkness. “Just the two of us against an army of travelers?” she asked, her tone challenging and incredulous.

“This is our time,” Frank retorted, waving at the darkness that covered the glade in a heavy blanket. “We hunt in the cover of darkness, strike from the shadows. Spill blood and then melt back into the trees with the bodies. This is the way of the wolf. This will not be an open engagement on flat ground. This will be *our* hunt, and we will dictate its terms.”

He could see the argument land in the way that Silver’s eyes darkened slightly. A grim smile curled her lips. “It *might* work, but we will also be relatively blind in the dark. They could surround and overwhelm us with just numbers.”

“I can help with that,” a voice suddenly croaked.

They all turned to find Hoot staring at them, his eyes sunken

and pained but now looking back at them with at least the semblance of clarity. Before they could ask what he meant, the Tamer stumbled to his feet and then turned to face the branches of the Ancestor Tree. Even in the darkness, Frank could see birds and other small animals covering its branches. Their sleepless, beady eyes peered down at them – afraid, uncertain. The survivors of Haven.

"Brothers and sisters of the wing," Hoot shouted up at them. "Predators have entered our nest. They killed… they have killed members of our flock." He choked on this statement, struggling to continue. "They have taken our nest from us and threatened our young – your young."

Even while Frank was in his human form, Hoot seemed to pulse with a throbbing red glow as he spoke, the aura seeming to grow and expand with each word. Frank knew what was happening now – what he was seeing. Hoot was pouring his pain and his grief into his words even as he used *Communion*. And the birds responded with a flutter of wings and the snap of their beaks.

"We have a plan to defeat these predators, to drive them off. We will hunt them down with beak and claw. We will shred and grind and peck until we bathe in their blood, but we need your help. We need the flock.

"Will you be our eyes, brother and sisters of the wing? Will you spot our enemies in the darkness, so that we can dive upon them with swift vengeance? Will you help protect our nest? Will you avenge those that have fallen?"

As Hoot finished speaking, a brief silence descended upon the glade. Then, a lone shriek filled the air as a sparrow rose and took to the air. That single gesture was like a trigger – as though that single act had flipped a switch. As one, the birds rose from their perches. The faint rustle of feathers turned to an echoing rumble as the flock took flight. Their dark forms darted into the sky, spiraling into the air and creating a tornado of wing and claw and beak. Their cries filled the night sky.

Hoot seemed to pulse with a throbbing crimson light below them, and Frank could feel the primal spirit practically purr in his mind. "*The hunt begins*," it hissed.

Hoot met Frank's gaze, his spirit frail, but not entirely broken. "The flock and I will be your eyes. Are you sure you will be able to handle the travelers with just you and Silver?" His eyes conveyed his challenge, and something inside Frank responded.

"We will be more than enough to handle them," he growled back.

Without warning, Frank *shifted*.

His limbs cracked and stretched, growing and lengthening at an

alarming pace as dense black fur erupted along his skin. His legs inverted with a sickening crunch and his ribs ripped apart before knitting themselves back together. Thick claws descended from his fingers, jutting out into the air. Then the transformation swept over his face – his jaw dislocating before snapping back together with a click and the gnashing of fangs.

When Frank opened his eyes again, they glowed a blood-red as they surveyed the other members of the pack. He rolled his shoulders, stretching his newfound muscles, and his bones popped and crunched in response.

If he had seen glimmers of red before, he now saw that the sky was awash in crimson energy as the flock cried their pain and their anger into the sky. They foretold the battle to come. They called out for the death of the travelers. The spirit thrummed in the back of his mind, purring in time to the pulse of Frank's heart.

The group stared at Frank in shock, their eyes wide. Howl seemed to be struggling to remember how to breathe, and Spider actually shuffled a few steps away from Frank.

"What is this?" Abigail murmured to herself.

Only Hoot didn't back down or look surprised by Frank's transformation. He just gave him a curt nod – satisfied.

Then Frank's eyes turned to Silver.

Crimson met sapphire, and he saw the shock on her face as she surveyed his new form. He sensed hesitation and doubt warring with her own rage and anger, and below that he felt her fear and uncertainty at the changes that had wracked her own body.

He reached out a clawed hand toward her. "Will you come with me?" Frank growled. "Shall we show these travelers the fury of the pack?"

A moment of doubt – fleeting. Then Silver's eyes hardened, flaring with blue energy. She took his hand, a small deadly smile curving her lips. In Frank's sight, she flared a brilliant red, her soul answering his own.

Frank lifted his head to the sky, letting out a piercing howl that echoed across the glade. His roar was matched by the others, their screams tearing through the night air. They shouted their war cry with wild abandon – filling the sky with the promise of death. It was a call to battle. It was a final warning to their enemies.

The hunt had begun.

Chapter 31 - Horrific

James was sitting in the middle of *Haven* – as these damnable druids insisted on calling it. The irony of the name wasn't lost on him. This was no longer a refuge for these people, their homes now turned into makeshift prison cells.

The flames of the campfire in front of him rippled and danced in the night air, throwing shadows against the woven branches that made up the walls of the nearby buildings. He sat on the western edge of the town, one of the many scouting parties that Liam had stationed in a perimeter around the village. Dense forest loomed only a few yards away, and a heavy silence hung over the town, interrupted only by the occasional crackle and pop of the fire.

They hadn't been able to figure out how these wannabe druids cast their magic. Although, it was clear that they could control beasts, could shift forms, and could manipulate plants. So, the puzzle of the day had been how to imprison people that could make the walls of their home disappear in a matter of seconds.

James' eyes flitted to the group of hooded players that exited a nearby house and soon disappeared around the corner of another. Their jovial voices drifted through the air as they made their rounds. James knew they would head to a neighboring building, administer more poison, and then move on to the next, leaving paralyzed villagers in their wake.

This wasn't a long-term plan, but it had worked for now.

"We should just go ahead and kill them," Harper muttered beside him, having followed James' gaze, alerted by the voices of the other players.

"It would be easier in some ways," James replied. They had both been among the players that had been captured by the druids and fed to the ice beast. He could still visualize the creature's gaping maw and the way it had torn off his arm. He shuddered, trying to force the memory away.

"Do you really think we'll be able to use these people to farm materials?" Harper demanded, glancing at him. "They're too powerful to control for long. If they hadn't bought Liam's bluff in the plains…"

James grimaced. Then they would have been in for one hell of a fight. They probably would have won eventually, but it would have cost them dearly.

"I don't know," James finally replied. "But Liam has never steered us wrong. You have to admit his plan is also… ambitious."

James could still visualize the hanging gardens they had discovered on the march to Haven. The guild wasn't oblivious to the fact that health potions were a hot commodity right now. Someone had driven up the prices by creating an effective monopoly. A group of slave druids would give them a competitive edge, and that money could help them build an empire on the northern side of the mountains.

"We just need to find the children that escaped," James muttered, rubbing at his neck. Their advance strike force had been decimated, reporting that just a few NPCs had managed to defeat them and flee with the children through some sort of underground tunnel.

"And if these people find out we don't have them?" Harper asked dryly.

"Then I guess we will be forced to kill them," James answered with a shrug, struggling to keep his voice impassive. He didn't love that Liam's plan had involved them kidnapping a bunch of children – even if they weren't real and even if these people might deserve it. He kept trying to tell himself that they were just ones and zeros, although that justification fell flat in the face of their very real-looking pain.

A lone chirp rang out from the tree line, interrupting the quiet. James' brow furrowed. It was strange for birds to be out at this time of night. "You hear that?" he asked Harper.

"Just a bird," his friend replied with a shrug, his eyes distant as he presumably stared at a set of screens in front of him – the displays not visible to James.

"Just a bird?" James echoed. "Do you hear yourself right now? We're sitting in the middle of a damn druid village. We should check it out."

"Fine, if it will make you feel better," Harper replied, frustration coloring his voice.

James bit back his own irritation. It had been a long day, and everyone in the guild was on edge. They might have the upper hand right now, but until they had captured the children and the dungeon had been marked as complete, they couldn't afford to relax.

Harper swiped away his screens, and stood abruptly, James following his lead. The pair drew their weapons and stalked toward the forest's edge. They stepped into the darkness gingerly, keeping their eyes peeled even as they inched farther and farther away from the flames of the fire.

Two more chirps rang out. This time from behind them, and James whirled, his fingers clenching around his wand. Something about this felt off. It felt wrong, but he couldn't place why he was suddenly so nervous. It was more instinct than anything.

“Hey, you hear that?” James whispered.

No response came from Harper.

James turned back and froze.

His friend was just gone.

His first thought was that Harper was hiding, playing some sort of prank on him. The asshole had probably dropped into *Sneak* and was already sitting back at the campfire, making chirping noises to mess with him. But that heavy feeling in his stomach hadn’t disappeared.

With a swipe of his hand, James brought up his raid menu, his eyes searching the icons for his friend’s name. With the size of the raid, this took several long seconds.

His eyes finally settled on “Harper.” The icon was grayed out. Had he logged off?

Or did something…

James never got to finish that thought.

Behind the screen, a pair of sapphire eyes suddenly hovered in the darkness. He almost hadn’t noticed them at first with the way they blended in with the glowing blue of his system menus. He started to shout a warning but felt something clutch him from behind. Massive claws wrapped around his throat and were cutting off his air. He was jerked off his feet, left dangling helplessly a few inches above the ground.

James felt panic flooding his mind as he struggled to breathe, his free hand scrabbling futilely against the claws. The grip it had on him was like iron. No matter how he struggled, he couldn’t get free. James tried to focus, to cast a spell with his wand. Another hand clutched his arm, and he heard a cracking sound.

A fiery explosion erupted along his wrist. He tried to move the limb, but nothing happened. James managed to look down and saw to his horror that his forearm had been snapped in half, bone jutting from his flesh at an unnatural angle.

This is a game. It isn’t real, he reminded himself.

Yet his mind refused to agree.

He tried to scream, but only a garbled, choking sob escaped his lips. He could feel his heart beating in his ears now, red notifications flashing in his peripheral vision. The blue eyes hovered in front of him, indifferent to his pain. The creature slowly emerged from the shadows.

It was a massive midnight-black wolf, its fur streaked with veins of silver. It stalked towards him almost casually. Then it opened its mouth, revealing rows of razor-sharp fangs. He could feel its hot breath on his face, and he saw his own death reflected in those eyes. It conjured memories of the ice beast, and how his own blood had

stained the creature's teeth.

"*Oh, god, no! Please!"* James tried to scream, but he couldn't.

The jaws snapped shut, and the world went dark.

James was suddenly floating in a black void – mercifully devoid of pain. He gasped, feeling at his arm, which was now intact. What the fuck was that? What was the monster he had seen? It didn't look like the other Shifters. And what the hell had grabbed him?

His eyes skimmed across the dark expanse around him as his swirling thoughts began to settle. He knew this place. This was the game's transition to the deathscape. However, as the minutes ticked by, the world didn't shift back into focus, and no ephemeral blue motes of energy drifted down around him as he revisited the scene of his death.

He also realized he hadn't received the typical death notification.

What the fuck is going on?

Just before James pulled up his system UI, a notification finally appeared in his vision.

System Notice

You have died.

For your crimes against Haven and its residents, your body has been interred beneath the Ancestor Tree, and your character has been destroyed, your essence returning to the earth.

Would you like to play again? [Yes/No]

James couldn't believe his eyes. His system UI wasn't responding, and the world remained a steadfast black void. In the darkness, the reality of his situation began to sink in, a hollow, sick feeling settling in his stomach. He suddenly realized that those creatures were still inside Haven – and the rest of his guildmates didn't yet understand the threat.

"Oh shit," James murmured.

* * *

The group of five players made their way to the next house, joking and jostling each other. They were making the rounds of the intricately grown buildings, feeding poison to a bunch of prone druids, one by one. It was a simple paralytic, intended to keep them frozen and docile until Liam decided what to do with them.

"You want to handle this group?" Jasmine offered, throwing a sack at a plate-clad warrior. "I need to check on a few messages."

"Making me do your grunt work, huh?" Alan replied, glaring at her.

She just gave him a shit-eating grin in return – shrugging. "The new guys get the crap work. Hazing is a tried and true tradition, after all." The rogue then leaned against the building, the others lounging around her.

"Bunch of lazy assholes," Alan muttered under his breath, clutching the bag.

However, he had just joined <Knights of the New Republic> and he didn't want to step on the veterans' toes. He was just thankful they had let him participate in this raid – the sign-on bonus alone had been pretty enticing, so he was sure others would have gladly filled his spot. This game could be pretty intense solo.

He gritted his teeth and entered the building, shoving aside the branch door more forcefully than he needed to. He found druids haphazardly sprawled across the floor, their prone bodies as still and unmoving as corpses. He'd been at this for a couple hours, but the sight still freaked him out. It had only gotten worse once the sun had set.

He slowly made his rounds, pouring a few drops of the poison into their open mouths. However, as he made it to the third prone form, Alan heard four chirps come from outside.

That was strange.

He figured it was probably just Jasmine whistling or making a joke with the others. Dismissing it, he started moving to the next immobile druid, pouring another few drops in the man's mouth. His eyes were still open and alert, tracking Alan's movements. He didn't need that memory burned into his mind, so he threw the man's shirt up over his head.

Then he heard a muffled thump and what sounded like a choked-off scream.

"What the hell are you doing out there?" Alan shouted. Really? They were going to make him do all the work and then mess around? He could still vividly remember Liam's orders. They needed to stay on their toes until they recovered the children.

He stormed outside, preparing to yell at the others, consequences be damned.

However, as Alan shoved the door open, he froze in place.

The scene outside was one of devastation.

His teammates were simply gone, and blood covered every square inch of the doorway, still dripping down the wooden frame. He looked at the wall of the building and saw what looked like the bloody silhouette of a player outlined against the branches, as though the player had been standing there when someone let loose a gory hose.

"What the fuck…"

He was cut off as he heard a twig snap behind him, and he whirled.

A living demon stood in front of him, the creature towering nearly nine feet into the air. Its eyes glowed a blood-red, floating in the darkness. Before Alan could react, it reached out and snatched him by the throat, cutting off his ability to scream.

It then pressed a clawed hand to his stomach, digging up and under his chestplate before carving into his flesh below his breastbone. Alan could feel his own organs shifting and moving despite the game's dampened pain feedback. His blood sprayed the ground in a crimson torrent and dripped down the steel armor. Then there was a sharp jerk and a flash of burning pain.

The beast released him, and Alan dropped to the ground, red notifications flashing in his peripheral vision. He could just make out the monster standing above him, Alan's still-beating heart in its hand. The organ pulsed weakly, each small tremor causing blood to spray from the torn arteries.

Then darkness mercifully claimed him.

* * *

Julia had been eating a snack in her kitchen when her Core flashed. A message scrawled up her forearm, echoing across the guild chat server in all caps.

Liam: @everyone HAVEN IS UNDER ATTACK! EVERYONE GET THE HELL IN-GAME NOW!

Liam wasn't the sort to overreact, so Julia took the warning seriously. Every wasted second spent in the real-world meant four had passed in-game. She shoveled a few more bites into her mouth before

sprinting to her room from the kitchen, shoving the helmet over her head and flopping down on her bed. She tapped through a series of boot-up messages in a lightning-fast series of gestures.

A moment later, Julia was standing in Haven, the branches of the nearby buildings spiraling around her. Night had fallen since she had last logged in, which threw her off. This was just made worse by the fact that it was still late afternoon in the real world. She also wasn't quite certain where she was. This forced her to do a doubletake as she examined her surroundings.

Her eyes soon widened in shock.

It was like she had logged into a virtual nightmare.

Blood. There was just so much blood.

It drenched the nearby walls, dripping down the wood in a sticky coating. It stained the dirt and ground. She glanced to her left and saw a dismembered arm lying on the ground, its fingers still twitching. A scream erupted from a street over, the cry cut off abruptly.

The raid menu in her peripheral vision was a chaotic nightmare. The icons would flash green as someone logged in only to go gray a moment later. The chat wasn't much better. People were screaming at each other frantically, the messages scrolling down the log too quickly for her to keep track of what they were saying.

Yet she didn't see any enemies. There were no obvious signs of battle, no army of NPCs marching through the village. Only the darkness, the silence, and the blood.

Julia yanked her staff from the loop across her back, holding it firmly in her sweating palms. She called her mana, and a spiral of flame wove its way up the length of the wooden staff before forming a globe of fire at the top. She could hold the *Fireball* for a long time, using it to illuminate the area around her and allowing her to throw it quickly if needed.

She needed to regroup with her guildmates in the center of Haven. She knew that was where Liam would be, probably resting safely in the makeshift headquarters they had erected in the druids' former marketplace. Julia made her way forward cautiously, keeping close to the edge of the buildings.

Why the hell did I log out way out here? she wondered, cursing her own stupidity. She had been arrogant. But they had easily captured the town before she had logged out!

She peered inside the structures as she passed, noting that the town's residents were still lying across the floor – frozen under the effects of the paralytic poison. So, the residents hadn't launched a counterattack.

Who is attacking us then?

Julia turned a corner, inspecting the way forward carefully. She didn't see any signs of movement on the street. Only more blood and what looked like entrails lying along the ground. She swallowed to force back the bile that rose in her throat. Her heart was thumping in her ears, loud and throbbing, and her hands clenched her staff tighter.

Whoever their enemy was, it was a monster. No human could do this.

She heard a single faint chirp from across the road.

Julia immediately shoved herself back against a nearby building and launched her *Fireball* across the street. The flames raced forward, splashing against the side of a wooden structure. The intricately woven branches immediately lit in flames, smoke curling into the night air. Yet she didn't see any enemies hiding in the shadows. Only a small sparrow rested on a nearby tree branch, its eyes staring straight at her.

Shit. She gazed at the growing flames, realizing that they would soon spread to the nearby trees and buildings. *Shit. Shit. Shit. Liam is going to be pissed!*

She moved to try to put out the flames but didn't make it more than a few inches before she was suddenly jerked off her feet. Something had snatched her hair from above, whipping her up into the night air. Her feet left the ground, and a sickening feeling overcame her as she felt her hair tear free with a burning sensation that rippled across her scalp.

Julia tilted in the air as she hit the apex of her climb and then began to fall. She saw the creature that had grabbed her then, its hulking dark form crouched on top of the building she had been huddled against only a moment before. Its glowing red eyes watched her impassively as she fell. Even worse, she saw an enormous dark wolf break away from the shadows of the building and peer up at her.

She was heading directly toward the wolf. As she met its glowing blue eyes, she saw no compassion there – only a bottomless hunger and rage. It opened its jaws wide, rows of teeth resting before her. It was waiting for her.

There's just two of them.

Only two…

Julia squeezed her eyes shut, tears already streaming down her cheeks. She didn't see the death blow, but she would forever remember the feeling of those fangs snapping around her throat and the vicious jerk that ended her life.

* * *

Sam logged into AO with a flash of multi-colored light. The first thing he noticed was the light. Bright-orange flames danced all around him, the heat almost palpable. He coughed, quickly covering his mouth as notifications danced in the air around him, informing him that he couldn't breathe.

What the fuck is this? He had logged out inside one of the buildings; he could vaguely remember that detail. Now it was little more than a fiery inferno.

Sam struggled for the door, flailing blindly amid the flames and smoke. The fire was already licking at his skin and clothing, his chainmail offering little protection. He could feel burning welts forming along his arms and legs, and his throat felt hoarse and raspy. Red notifications continued to flash in the corners of his vision.

He panicked when he couldn't locate the exit. In an act of desperation, he simply barreled into a flaming wall, smashing his shoulder against it. The weakened wood gave way, but it wasn't enough. He kicked at it hard and kept pounding until a wooden segment finally fell away.

Sam half-fell and half-crawled through the narrow opening, landing on his knees in the dirt and grass. He gasped for breath, feeling the cool night air replace the smoke in his lungs. He wasn't certain how long he knelt there, trying to recover.

However, he looked up as he heard a single high-pitch chirp.

A raven sat on a nearby branch, observing him calmly. As Sam looked on, it let out another chirp and pivoted its head to look to Sam's left.

Sam followed its gaze, only to discover a pack of children dragging what looked like corpses from a nearby building. The sight was eerie – both to see children in such a scene of devastation and to observe how easily they moved the larger bodies.

A few things connected at once. These were the druid children. They had to be. And those must be the druids that they were keeping poisoned and prone in each building. He looked behind him and saw that his wasn't the only building aflame. Most of the southern part of Haven was now a blazing inferno.

Sam heard a low growl and turned back, realizing that the children's eyes were now trained on him. He didn't see fear there. No, he saw only feral anger and rage reflected in their small eyes.

He raised his hands. "Hey there…"

Sam was suddenly cut off as vines wrapped around his throat. He felt similar tendrils spiral around his arms and legs, holding him in place and lashing him to the ground. He noticed a small boy whispering quietly, almost crooning to the plants, as he stared at Sam.

Then he saw a group of three children approach, a young girl,

slightly taller than the rest, leading them. She growled – low and feral – as her body shimmered with multi-colored energy. Hair sprouted from her skin, and her limbs twisted and elongated. Her face changed, a snout appearing and large fangs snapping at the air. A moment later, Sam was looking into the face of a young wolf.

The other two children soon joined her, their bodies shifting and changing before his eyes until a small group of beasts stood in front of him. However, this wasn't a friendly group of creatures. He saw only fangs and claws and death.

Oh crap.

This was the last thought that Sam managed before the three Shifter children leaped toward him. Fangs clenched around his throat and tore into the exposed joints of his armor. He tried to scream, but no sound came out with the tendrils that bound him. He could feel himself bleeding out, red notifications flashing a futile warning. There was just blood – his own blood – staining the ground and pooling beneath him. Far too much for him to walk away from this. With that realization came a sinking sense of helpless dread.

He couldn't move. He couldn't scream. He could only lie there mute and frozen as the Shifter children tore him apart.

* * *

"The western scouting parties are all dead," a player shouted at Liam.

"Most of the raid is logging back in, but the casualties are extreme," another woman reported, her eyes skimming across her screens. "Many are dying as soon as they get back in-game."

Liam was standing in the center of Haven in what had once been the town's market. It had now been repurposed, a rough wooden blockade ringing the clearing. Liam stood in the center of a chaotic scene. A lone globe of light illuminated the market, pushing back at the shadows that hovered among the forested buildings around them. What remained of his players rushed through the areas, setting up a defensive formation along the makeshift fortifications.

Liam grimaced as his gaze panned across the translucent blue panels that hovered in front of him, ignoring the orders and information that his lieutenants were shouting. As he watched, he saw an icon flash green, signaling that a player had logged in, only to see it gray out a moment later.

Something out there was slaughtering his soldiers.

What was even more troubling was that they had lost contact

with the players who had died. By this point, he would have expected his dead guildmates to be in the deathscape and to provide a detailed account of what had killed them through the in-game chat or the guild's chat server. This was standard protocol when someone died, allowing even a dead player to provide some value to the rest of the raid.

Yet there was nothing. Only silence.

The dead players all appeared to immediately go offline as soon as their icons went gray. This left them flying blind.

What the hell is happening?

Liam's eyes skimmed the market around him. There were only a few dozen players left, and the casualties just kept mounting. Whatever was hunting his guild had killed at least seventy players already. He just had to hope they could hold the market until their dead respawned and managed to reinforce them.

His eyes skimmed to the orange glow in the distance. Dense black smoke curled into the air, almost invisible against the night sky. His scouts had reported on the blaze that was ravaging the southern end of the town. With the way the buildings were formed from interwoven branches, they were nearly all linked, allowing the fire to spread unabated. There wasn't anything to be done about it, though. He just couldn't afford to send any of his remaining water mages to suppress the blaze.

A hollow feeling settled in his stomach. That meant the paralyzed druids would be burnt alive within the houses, effectively destroying his plan to repurpose the town as a farming community. Not that he could do anything about that right now. It was too dangerous to send out his remaining players.

"Damn it," Liam muttered to himself.

A ding sounded on his UI, and he looked at his chat log. On a locked guild channel, one of his dead lieutenants had finally messaged the group.

Harper: I managed to log out and message you all on my Core. Guys, this is bad. Like really fucking bad.

Liam: What the hell took you so long!? What's attacking us?

Harper: My character is just gone. Deleted. Between that and the time delay, it took me forever to message you guys. There

are at least two creatures in the woods. They are hunting us and killing us off. Maybe Shifters…

Liam could only stare at the chat window as his other lieutenants started chiming in, questioning Harper and whether he was telling the truth.

His character was permanently deleted?

His thoughts kept circling that one question. How was that even possible? His emotions ranged from angry outrage to despair in a heartbeat as the full import of their situation finally hit him. Who the hell would build that sort of mechanic into a game?

Liam looked up to find his lieutenants staring at him, waiting for his instructions. He saw the sudden fear and worry in their eyes. This wasn't just a simple battle where they would respawn at the entrance to the valley. The risks had now become very real.

The guild leader's eyes skimmed the shadows around the market, the darkness shifting and sputtering erratically with the light thrown off by their camp and the growing orange blaze in the distance. The shadows suddenly seemed more ominous.

Something was out there. It was hunting them. And its judgment was final.

Liam finally knew fear – real fear.

What have I done?

Chapter 32 - Merciless

Frank sat perched on top of a building, his attention on the market in the distance. With *Eyes of the Hunt*, he could see each player outlined in a faint red aura, moving and shifting through the courtyard. Some glowed more brightly or more weakly based on their emotional state. Even now, he could recall some of his victims. They had practically blazed with crimson light as he and Silver took their lives – their fear on full display.

Now only a few dozen players remained.

He felt the branches tremble and a moment later, Silver was beside him, reassuming her human form. “We have evacuated nearly all of the buildings on the southern edge of town.”

“Casualties?” Frank asked, his voice coming out in a hoarse growl. The sound still surprised him. He didn’t even sound human anymore.

She shook her head. “I’m sure some have died, but we saved as many as we could. The children are still working on the outlying buildings. Spider has finished digging the graves and has moved up to assist them. They should be relatively safe.”

Frank wasn’t too concerned. They had messed up with the fire mage woman, letting her cast that damned *Fireball*. However, the fires had proven to be a mixed blessing. The chaos made their work even easier, spreading mayhem and throwing the players off balance. However, it had also endangered the poisoned residents of Haven.

They had been forced to enlist the children to help save the other townsfolk. He had been nervous at putting Sophie and her gang in harm’s way, but that worry had proven fruitless. The children were more than capable of taking care of themselves and had taken to the task of evacuating the poisoned residents of Haven with terrifying enthusiasm.

After watching Sophie marshal the other children with military precision and personally rip the throat from more than one player, Frank no longer had any qualms. They were vicious and calm in the face of danger.

His gaze shifted back to the former marketplace.

Now they had one final problem to face.

The players had created a circular barricade of wooden debris, forming a low wall and creating some space between them and the interwoven branches of the buildings that formed Haven. They were being cautious – creating some space in case the fires reached the

center of town and enough distance that the buildings couldn't easily be turned against them. At least, not without some advance warning.

The players also still had the advantage of numbers. It would be hours before the remaining residents of Haven shrugged off the effects of the poison and were able to assist them, but they couldn't afford to let the players regroup or come at them in full force. Frank knew that they had succeeded so far by relying on the darkness, the chaos, and their enemy's lack of information.

However, they were running against the clock. The players were beginning to regroup and each passing second only destroyed more of Haven. They needed to quench the fires before they spread further or moved into the adjoining forests.

In short, they needed to finish this quickly.

"What now?" Silver asked softly, echoing his thoughts.

Frank gnashed his newfound fangs. He had been in his new *Werewolf Form* for so long now that he had almost forgotten he was maintaining the *shift*. His glowing-red eyes moved to the center of the courtyard. He couldn't see Liam's face from this distance, but he assumed the lone man in the center was the guild leader. He could see that he and his lieutenants were practically shining with crimson energy, the aura pulsing and throbbing.

"*They are scared*," the spirit hissed in the back of his mind. "*Prey backed into a corner of their own making. They feel the wall at their tail and the predators approaching.*"

Frank nodded slightly. Some of the first players they had killed must have finally made it back to the real world and managed to message the others. The confusion and time disparity between the real world and the game had worked to their advantage.

"*Though the other prey remain calm. Perhaps they do not yet know that we linger in the darkness or the true extent of our strength*," the shadowy voice continued, almost sounding amused.

A frown pinched at Frank's forehead. The primal spirit was right. The other players glowed more weakly to his enhanced sight. Why wouldn't they be worried about losing their characters?

There was only one obvious answer to that question, and his eyes widened as he realized that the spirit must be right. Ignorance was bliss, after all. However, why wouldn't Liam tell his own troops? Cocking his head, Frank tried to put himself in the guild leader's shoes. His perspective suddenly shifted – Liam's choices laid out clearly before him.

"*A good predator understands his prey*," the spirit crooned.

He couldn't help but agree. A plan was beginning to form in Frank's mind. Jason would be proud. Even the spirit purred in approval as it sifted through his thoughts. It was a daring plan, bathed

in blood and fueled by fury.

Frank let out a soft bark of laughter and his eyes flashing ominously. Silver stared at him her head tilted in confusion.

"You have a plan?" she asked.

"I do," Frank nodded. "It's time to finally reveal our presence." Then he laid out his thoughts quickly – they couldn't afford to waste any time.

A moment later, Silver stared back at him wide-eyed. "That is crazy," she said, trailing off as she shook her head.

"But it will work," Frank said firmly.

He met her glowing blue eyes evenly. "Do you trust me?"

Silver looked at him for a long moment and then gave a curt nod.

"Good. You'll need to hurry to enlist Spider's help. You have maybe five minutes, at most," Frank explained.

With that, he moved to jump off the building. Yet Silver placed a staying hand on his arm, her human fingers twining through his thick, dark fur.

"Be careful," she said quietly. She gave off a single crimson pulse – her concern for him momentarily pushing back at her own bloodlust.

He could feel his own fear and doubt lingering at the back of his mind. He had much to lose here. Silver. The people he cared about. His own life.

Yet the primal spirit spoke up then, purring into his ear. "*We can help you. We can make you strong. You need only embrace us*." It offered a mental hand, just waiting for Frank to accept it.

And so he did.

Frank reached out and accepted the primal spirit. He felt his doubt and his hesitation bleed away – leaving only a single purpose and a cold fury. He – *they* – were the predator. And the predator didn't know fear. That emotion was for prey. They knew only hunger and the hunt.

Frank met Silver's eyes, and he saw something in her respond to his own primal fury, her own hesitation fading. "We aren't the ones that should be afraid," Frank murmured.

Then he leapt into the darkness.

* * *

Liam swallowed hard, his eyes skimming across the players that had settled along the barricade, facing the darkness. His lieutenants

stood beside him, stone-faced and clutching their weapons with a white-knuckle grip. They knew the truth. They knew just how bad the situation truly was.

What's our next move? Liam asked himself for at least the dozenth time in the last five minutes. He had been backed into a corner, and there were few options before him.

They hadn't told the other guild members yet that whatever hunted them in the darkness could destroy their character. They didn't want to alarm them and spread even more panic. Morale was already low, and he could visualize their reaction. Some would immediately log off, and others would flee east – trying to make it out of the valley.

So, Liam and his lieutenants had made the decision to lock down the guild chat server. This bought them some time, even though he knew it wouldn't last. Eventually, the other players would discover the truth – a real-world message between two buddies would be enough to unravel the whole thing.

However, that still left him with very few options.

They could all log off. That would certainly protect their characters. But they would eventually need to log back in. At that point, they would be in the middle of an enemy town – having given the residents of Haven time to recover from the poison.

Liam glanced at the flames that roared across the southern portion of the town, inching ever closer. That assumed that the residents were still alive, of course. Regardless, they had no idea how many enemies they faced or if they had rescued any of the townsfolk. That seemed likely. It was the move he would have made – using the chaos as a cover to save the poisoned druids.

Which meant that their only real option was to hightail it out of this fucking valley. They could kill themselves, but they would just respawn at the pass, and this would give their enemy time to regroup. There was a high probability they would respawn in the middle of a pack of enemies. Or they could physically retreat, which would likely minimize their casualties. This last option was probably their best bet.

However, first they had to deal with whatever was hunting them. Liam didn't relish the idea of being pursued through the forest east of Haven – creatures leaping from the trees and cutting them down amid the twilight that lingered between those silent trunks. It would be too easy for his players to get picked off and for the retreat to turn into a panicked rout.

His thoughts were interrupted as an alarm went up from the southern line.

"Contact," a player shouted.

Liam rushed to the south side of the barricade, his eyes skimming the buildings. He didn't see anything among the darkness –

at least not at first. Flames lit the night skyline behind the structures, the orange light causing shadows to dance and spin across the rooftops.

Then a pair of red eyes suddenly appeared from the darkness, the creature's body almost invisible in the shadows cast by the flames. What Liam could make out looked huge, sending a shudder down his spine.

"*Hello, prey*," a hoarse voice called out. It sounded inhuman, the words coming out in a low growl that rumbled across the courtyard.

A blast of ice and fire filled the air without warning. The bolts of ice and flame smashed into the rooftop where the creature had been resting only a moment before, washing the area in flame and tearing through the flimsy wooden shingles. The players were jumpy and on edge – their fear getting the best of them.

"Cease fire," Liam shouted in irritation.

The players grudgingly responded to his orders, and the barrage waned. As the debris cleared, he could see that the entire top of the house had been blown off. The only mercy was that the ice had put out the fires before they could catch hold. The last thing they needed was to set another building ablaze.

Yet there was also no body.

"Do not fire until I give the order," Liam commanded. He stared down the other players until they gave grudging nods.

"*Sloppy and slow*," the creature hissed. The glowing red eyes had appeared on a nearby building, unperturbed by the barrage of fire and ice.

"Who are you?" Liam shouted back. If the creature was willing to talk, he was all ears. They had few options right now.

The creature barked out a harsh laugh. "*We are a predator. A creature of fang and claw and blood. But you might know us as Frank, left hand of the Twilight Throne*." As the beast spoke, he stepped forward, the light of the flames behind him suddenly illuminating his form in a flickering orange glow as he stretched up his full height.

Liam could feel a hollow weight settle in his stomach, and he heard gasps from the players around him. What they saw wasn't human. It was a beast nearly nine feet tall, rippling muscle and thick dark fur covering its body. Yet it was the eyes that captured Liam. They glowed a bright crimson – unlike anything he had seen inside of AO.

The promise of blood and death shone in those red orbs. If this was indeed a player, then he was clearly unhinged. More than that, he had progressed far past anything they had encountered before. This player had shed his humanity and was now more beast than man.

Liam weakly inspected the creature, soon confirming what it had said. He could see the words "Frank <Original Sin>" hovering above the beast's head, glowing a translucent blue. Liam knew that name; they all knew that name. They also knew the power that guild tag carried. It was the allegiance of armies of the dead and the support of the Regent of the Twilight Throne – the most wanted man in AO: Jason.

"*Ahh, we see you know us*," Frank growled, observing them calmly.

Liam tried to shake off his stupor, his mind wheeling in confusion. He had met another Frank not too long ago, and he suddenly realized his mistake. He had given away his plans, and his numbers to what he had thought was some noob.

"What do you want?" Liam asked, trying to keep the quaver from his voice.

"*We want you to die*," Frank answered simply.

The players shuffled nervously, sparing glances at Liam. The guild leader's own thoughts were spinning. What was this? A distraction to mount a surprise attack? A parley between two enemy forces?

"*But we are also curious*," Frank hissed, hunching down onto the roof. "*We wonder why our prey hasn't asked why their fellows do not return. Why do they not come back to life? Why do they stay silent? Or perhaps our prey is too frightened to consider this*."

Liam went still, rigid in shock. Was Frank implying that he knew he had permanently slain the other players? How was that possible?

The players were looking at each other now, frowns plastered on their faces. Several swiped at the air, bringing up their system UI.

Oh shit, Liam thought. He knew where Frank was going with this now.

"*We have destroyed them utterly*," Frank said in almost a whisper, his voices drifting through the market. "*Those that die inside Haven do not respawn – ever. They only know a permanent sleep.*"

"What the fuck," a player beside Liam murmured, swiping at the air in front of him, presumably bringing up his chat window to message a friend. More and more of the players were now looking back at him, dread and judgment in their eyes.

Liam gulped hard.

"*But perhaps we have had enough bloodshed for today*," Frank murmured thoughtfully. "*So, we will offer you a truce. You may leave the valley – right now.*"

The players were murmuring amongst themselves now, glaring at Liam. More than one person was starting to edge toward the eastern

side of the barricade – freedom resting just on the other side of the forest and the plains.

Liam's thoughts were wheeling, and yet he was stuck on a single question. Why offer them a way out?

"You're bluffing," Liam's voice suddenly rang out.

He turned to address his guildmates. "I have no idea how he has done it, but it is true that Frank has permanently killed many players tonight. We cannot change that." More angry murmurs met his words.

"However, try to look at the situation calmly," Liam continued. "Logging out or running now puts us all at risk. We are stronger together."

Liam glanced back at Frank's glowing red eyes. "And if Frank indeed has the power to kill us here, he would have done so already. We still have numbers. We have a fortified position, and the people of Haven are dead or dying. A single man stands before you.

"One man," Liam repeated. He could see his people beginning to settle, anger flashing in their eyes as they looked at Frank.

The guild leader turned back to the monster on the rooftop, his gaze challenging. "He is bluffing. He is trying to split us…"

A hoarse, guttural laugh echoed across the courtyard. "*Our prey is backed into a corner, shivering and weak and yet it pretends it is in a position of power. We do not make our offer out of fear.*"

Frank's eyes flashed a brilliant crimson. "*We make our offer out of mercy.*"

As he finished speaking, darkened figures rose along the buildings surrounding the market, their shadowy forms hidden just out of sight. At the same time, the structures surrounding the square began to shift and move, the tendrils undulating like wooden snakes. Low growls came from the shadowy forms, an echoing rumble that conveyed a clear message.

The druids had returned.

Liam stared at these dark forms, dread coiling in his stomach. How was this possible? His eyes darted back to Frank. Had he healed the other druids? Cured the poison? Had they missed some of the townsfolk? Had more escaped than he realized?

He glanced at the players around him and saw the fear and resignation in their eyes.

A player dropped his weapon, holding up his hands. "I will accept your offer," the player shouted.

"*Then go, prey. Run fast. Other predators may linger in the darkness*," Frank barked.

The player looked at the others and then bolted for the trees. When Frank made no move to follow, the other players took this as an

opening. Almost as one, they broke formation and started sprinting to the east, heading directly toward the mouth of the valley.

Liam watched this all numbly, his mind wheeling. He knew he couldn't stop them. He couldn't convince them to stay and stand against this enemy.

They had lost. *He* had lost.

Yet something still felt off – felt wrong.

As the last player filtered out of the marketplace, Liam was left standing alone in the center of the square. With a grunt, Frank leaped forward, his massive form landing with an almost unnatural grace and a soft thump only a few feet away. He rose to his full height, staring down at Liam and his glowing red eyes glimmering and shifting.

At the same time, a midnight-black wolf broke from the shadows of a nearby building, sauntering into the square until it stood beside the werewolf. In contrast to Frank, its eyes were a brilliant sapphire. Blood and ice stared at Liam.

"*Spider, you may drop the spell now*," Frank growled, his voice echoing through the clearing. He never broke Liam's gaze.

The guild leader watched as the figures along the rooftops bled away, drifting back down into the buildings. The undulating movement of the vines also quieted. The realization hit him then.

"A bluff. It really was a bluff," he murmured weakly.

Liam raised his eyes to meet Frank's. He resisted the urge to try to type out a warning. He knew that any sudden movement would result in his death. "What will you do to them?" he choked out. "Was your mercy a lie too?"

"*The same thing that we will do to you*," Frank replied. "*You attacked the valley. You tried to hunt the pack. You attempted to kill or kidnap children. You intended to enslave these people.*"

He leaned forward hungrily, his fangs snapping. "*We will hunt you down one-by-one, striking from the darkness until your blood returns to the earth. There will be no mercy.*"

Liam's fingers twitched, and he suddenly moved, trying to type out one last warning.

He never made it.

The dark wolf's jaws clamped shut on his hand, a burning pain erupting along his skin. With a vicious jerk, the wolf's fangs tore his hand free, Liam's blood pouring from the wound. He feebly tried to grab for his weapon, but he was knocked onto his back, a pair of sapphire eyes hovering in front of him.

Dread coiled in his stomach. Everything he had built, everything he had learned and gained was going to be stripped from him. He knew he wouldn't die – not really. But it was difficult to convince his mind of that fact as he saw those sharp fangs hover in

front of him.

Then the wolf lunged.

Chapter 33 - Worried

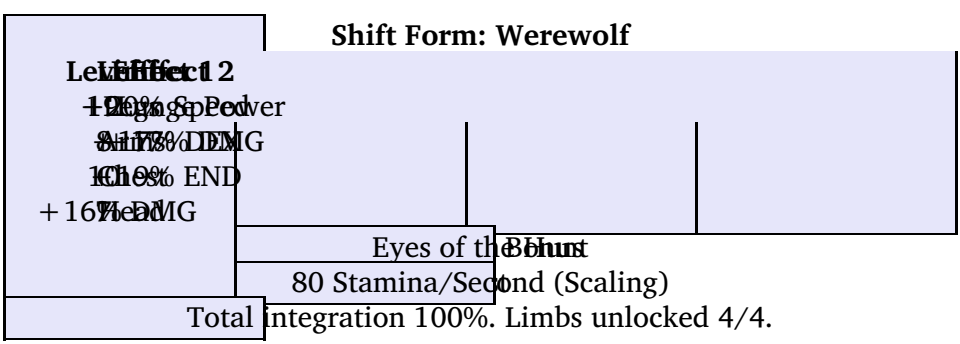
Frank and Silver rested in a small forested antechamber. Well, Frank was resting. Silver was pacing the enclosure like some sort of caged animal and occasionally growling to herself.

It was hard to believe that only a little more than twenty-four hours had passed since the players initially launched their assault on the valley. After routing Liam's forces, Frank and Silver had gone on the hunt. They had cut down the players as they raced through the forest east of Haven. Between the elevated beds that encircled each tree and the cover of darkness, the forest had quickly been turned into a killing ground – the roots feasting on the blood of the fallen. Only a few stragglers made it to the plains – and of that handful, only a single player made it out of the valley alive.

That had been intentional. They had decided to leave at least one living witness.

The battle had also reaped other rewards. When Frank finally shifted back into his human form, and the battle fugue wore off, he was met with a barrage of notifications.

x14 Level Up!
You have (70) undistributed stat points.



x5 Skill Rank Up: Eyes of the Hunt
Skill Level: Beginner Level 6
Effect: 9% increased sensitivity.

x7 Skill Rank Up: Fang and Claw
Skill Level: Beginner Level 8

Effect: 12% increased balance and agility.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Bloodlust
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5
Effect 1: 17% Damage increase.
Effect 2: -14% Stamina drain.
Effect 3: Kills return 10% health and stamina.

Character Status

Name:	
Primary Class:	Shifter
Level:	
Affinity:	
Health:	
Mana:	
Stamina:	
Strength	
Dexterity	
Will	

Affinities

Darkness:	
Fire:	
Water:	
Earth:	

Frank had placed the fifty points he had already gained equally into *Vitality* and *Endurance*. More health and stamina were always a good thing and they helped maintain his *shifts*. However, he decided to hold off on allocating his new points – at least for the moment. Now that he had fully unlocked his shifting abilities, he could likely obtain new forms. He might decide to focus more on *Strength* and *Dexterity*.

Despite his progress, he felt conflicted as he looked at the notifications. It felt like an age had passed since he had left the Twilight Throne – not just a short week in-game. He had also gotten his wish. He had grown in power, and he had begun to catch up with his friends. There was no denying that at this point.

Yet it had come at a cost.

His eyes shifted to Silver's lithe form as she paced back and forth through the room. She now wore a tight-fitting leather tunic and pants. The pair had taken at least a few minutes to wash the blood from their bodies. However, the more revealing clothing only served to emphasize the changes that had wracked Silver's body after he had implanted the demon's heart inside her chest.

Gone was the snow-white fur, replaced by midnight-black patches along her arms and shoulders. Her hair ran down her back in a raven-like waterfall, traces of silver twisting through the locks – allowing her to at least keep her namesake. If not for the frown that twisted her lips, Frank almost wouldn't have recognized her as the same woman that had originally kidnapped him.

"You're making me anxious," Frank said, breaking the heavy silence.

"I hate just sitting in here like some sort of prisoner," Silver snapped back, eyeing the nearby wall of branches.

"The council is just being cautious," Frank replied calmly. "Can you really blame them after everything that has happened?"

Silver rounded on him, her glowing sapphire eyes holding his own. "We saved their lives," she said bluntly.

"I'm aware," he replied in a dry tone. "But we also killed the demon that protected the valley, accidentally burned down half of Haven, endangered the prisoners, and conscripted a group of children to help kill travelers and rescue the remaining townsfolk." He ticked off each point on his fingers as he spoke.

"What we did may have also been *necessary*, but it was still *gruesome*. You saw what the town looked like this morning…" Frank trailed off, not certain he really wanted to finish that sentence. He didn't miss how Silver glanced away from him, grimacing.

"I'm just saying that it may take them some time to adjust," Frank offered.

Silver bit at her lip, her razor-sharp teeth drawing a pinprick of blood. Her eyes were distant. They had both done things last night that had been extreme, even among the Shifters. Silver's newfound hunger and Frank's primal nature had carried them through the battle and numbed them to the consequences. However, as the adrenaline fled their system and the sun crested the mountain ridge that ringed the valley, they had been forced to face what they had done.

And it was terrifying.

In the daylight, Haven had seemed to glow with a soft crimson light. Blood stained the streets and the sides of buildings. Severed limbs and organs riddled the ground. Nearly half of the structures had been burned to the ground, tendrils of smoke still curling into the air. Runner, Howl, and Spider had barely been able to contain the blaze

before it consumed the remainder of the town.

And then there were also the dozens of fresh graves that now rested beside the Ancestor Tree.

"Anyway," Frank continued, shaking off his dark thoughts, "don't you think this is sort of ironic?"

"How so?" Silver shot back, eyeing him skeptically.

"Well, I first came to Haven bound and imprisoned – with you sitting on the other side of that wall," he said, gesturing at the nearby branches, a grin on his face. "And now look at us! Two little *corrupted* peas in a sociopathic pod."

Frank caught a flash of amusement in her eyes that Silver quickly tried to suppress. "You're an idiot," she grumbled.

His smile widened.

Despite his joking tone, Frank could feel a pit in his stomach. He knew that this meeting would dictate their future – more importantly, it would determine Silver's future. Frank might be able to simply walk away from Haven, but Silver couldn't say the same. This was her home, and these were her people. Her family.

And they had much to account for. Not only the death of the demon and endangering the town, but Silver's transformation and the massacre that had taken place only a few short hours ago. Frank could still remember how Silver had feasted on their prey, draining their mana just as swiftly as she drank their blood and took bites out of their fresh corpses. Now, without the *Bloodlust* and the primal spirit's assistance, the images were difficult to stomach. He could only imagine how the others would react.

Silver had reason to be worried.

Frank suddenly leaned forward. Without thinking, he grabbed Silver's hand, causing her to finally still her pacing.

"Hey, joking aside, it *will* be okay," he said forcefully, meeting her eyes.

He saw worry there. And doubt. But also a faint spark of hope.

"I…" Silver began.

She never got to finish that sentence. They were interrupted as the branches along the wall broke apart and flowed out of the way, framing a door. A leather-garbed guard stepped through, holding a staff in one hand. Silver quickly stepped away from Frank as the guard eyed them warily. The man kept his distance, looming in the doorway.

"The council is ready to see you now," the man reported.

"About damn time," Silver growled, her teeth flashing again and the hair on her arms rising. Frank didn't miss the way the guard flinched back involuntarily. Neither did Silver, a frustrated frown tugging at her lips.

"Well, lead the way," Silver barked at the man, gesturing for

him to get on with it.

The guard gulped and then led them into the hall. To Frank's surprise, he found Shifters and Growers lining the walls, fully armed and their eyes following the pair carefully. As Frank passed one man, they locked eyes briefly, and he saw his hand inch toward his weapon.

They all seemed to pulse with a faint crimson aura.

"*They are afraid. As they should be. We are the apex predators now*," the spirit whispered. "*They show us the respect we deserve!*"

Frank could only shake his head as he followed Silver. The primal spirit had misunderstood the show of force as *respect*.

Frank saw it differently. This was a warning.

The worm of worry in his stomach wriggled and thrashed. Maybe he had underestimated the council's reaction. Suddenly, he wished he could pace that small room a few times to burn off some of the nervous energy he felt pulsing through is veins. Yet the time for that was over. They were about to face the council and the rest of Haven.

Chapter 34 - Alive

Frank blinked as bright sunlight suddenly flooded his vision, a stark change from the dreary room that he and Silver had been waiting in.

When his eyes finally adjusted, they widened in surprise at what awaited them. With the destruction of the meeting lodge and much of Haven, the council had been forced to meet outside. The market had been cleared of the players' makeshift fortifications, and Frank noted absently that a few Growers must have helped repurpose the area, forming a simple pavilion on one end and growing rows of benches for the townsfolk.

Damn, they work fast, Frank thought.

Every surviving resident of Haven was present, standing or sitting anywhere that they could find room. Animals littered the nearby rooftops and the branches of the trees that hung over the marketplace, twittering and growling softly.

While many of the townsfolk spared a passing glance in Frank's direction, most stared at Silver – taking in her changed appearance and the dark fur that now coated her body. They whispered to each other, and Frank saw fear and disgust reflected on their faces. This was the same reaction that had once been directed at him only a few short days ago.

The guards gestured for Frank and Silver to take center stage, the crowd reluctantly parting to let them step into the center of the market. No one cheered or clapped, and no victory cry went up from the crowd. This felt more like a funeral than a celebration of their victory – of Haven's survival.

Despite the hundreds of human and not-so-human eyes trained on them, Frank didn't feel uncomfortable. Something had changed since he last stood before the residents of Haven. He no longer felt nervous under their scrutiny, nor would he shy away from who he was or what they had done.

Frank only had eyes for Silver. Although she tried her best to hide it, he saw the tension in her shoulders and the way her fingers trembled slightly.

Frank's hand brushed hers as they stood side by side, and Silver glanced at him in surprise. He tried to convey a simple message with that one fleeting look. "*It will be okay*," he said. "*I am with you*."

He cocked his head to the side of the clearing.

Runner, Howl, Spider, Hoot, Abigail, and Sophie all stood

there, their gaze resolute and unwavering. They were all trying to deliver the same message: Silver was not alone. Her hunting pack stood with her. Frank could see some of the tension leave her shoulders, and her trembling stilled.

"We call this meeting of the council to order," Alderas said, his voice booming over the courtyard. The sounds of the beasts and humans stilled as all eyes focused on the council members.

The three elders stood on the pavilion, watching Frank and Silver. Sthren was his usual stoic self, although he looked more pale than usual. Leandra leaned heavily on a wooden crutch. Her leg was covered in salve, with signs of burns showing beneath the edges of the bandages. Alderas' burly arms were also wrapped in clean white cloth. All three looked haggard, dark circles hanging under their eyes. The poison that the players had administered had taken its toll. They looked like they had been through hell.

Most notably, Frank saw that the council members were struggling to face Frank and Silver. They wouldn't quite look them in the eye. He felt a confusing mixture of emotions coming off them in waves. The primal spirit's abilities didn't lend as much clarity when the emotions were more nuanced, and he was still in human form. He vaguely sensed guilt and fear. Pain and anger. However, it wasn't clear who or what was the target of those emotions.

"We have all endured much over the last twenty-four hours," Alderas began, his voice echoing across the market. "Travelers attacked our valley. They kidnapped our children – or at least they claimed they had. They imprisoned and poisoned our people. And in our darkest hour, our own presumably rose up and pushed these invaders back. They drew blood with fang and claw.

"But we have lost much. Our own – brothers and sisters of fur, wing, and flesh – have fallen in battle. More died in the flames before they could be saved. Our home is in shambles, consumed by fire," Alderas boomed, gesturing at the faint tendrils of smoke that still rose to the south.

He paused for a moment to let this sink in.

"In the face of this pain and hardship, it is only right that you all should ask *why* we have faced this danger. How were the travelers able to enter the valley? Why did they attack our home? And how did only a handful of our people manage to defeat them?"

At this last question, Alderas finally looked at Silver. A flash of fear – and something else Frank couldn't identify – swept across the Elder Shifter's face. Frank saw Silver's hands ball into fists at that single look.

"We hope to answer some of those questions today, to shine light on the darkness that festers in our hearts," Alderas said, his voice

echoing through the clearing. “We meet today to recount these events and to find a way to move forward. This conversation affects the entire pack, which is why we are all in attendance.

“And that discussion starts by first addressing the past. We need to better understand how we arrived here in order to decide on a destination.”

With that, Alderas waved a hand at Silver, giving her the floor.

The young woman squared her back, meeting her father’s eyes evenly. In that moment, Frank saw incredible strength in her – the will to face her own mistakes and to stand firm against the disgust and fear he saw reflected in those that looked upon her changed appearance. She didn’t balk from who she was or what she had done.

“My hunting pack killed the Beast that protected the valley,” Silver said, her voice firm and unwavering. She didn’t try to sugar coat that simple statement.

A hushed silence descended upon the courtyard.

“We discovered that the Beast was actually a demon that fed on mana – a master of illusion and deception.” Silver took a deep breath. “It tricked us. It was the demon that first sent the cultists to our village – knowing that they would steal our secrets and betray us.” Her eyes clouded as she recalled what she had lost – a mother, a name, and something more intangible. Happiness, perhaps?

“After… after what the cultists did to us, the creature preyed on our *fear*, convincing us to bring it travelers in return for its protection.” A murmur rippled through the crowd, although Frank saw more skepticism than outrage.

“It fed on their mana, growing in power. Its plan was to eventually leave the Chasm, conquering the neighboring kingdoms and feasting on man and beast alike in an attempt to quench its insatiable hunger.” Silver’s eyes skimmed the crowd. “It was only a matter of time before it turned on us.

“After we slew the demon, our hunting pack returned to Haven as quickly as we could – intending to warn the council. However, by the time we arrived, the travelers were already waiting at the mouth of the valley. They were preparing to attack the town.”

Silver glanced at the edge of the clearing where her hunting pack stood. “We scouted the enemy force, gathered information, and then snuck into the valley and reported to the council. As you are all aware, the council decided to prepare for war.”

She turned back to her father, her eyes meeting his. “This was done against our advice. We knew that the travelers were clever, and this was a battle that could not be won. Yet the council decided to face the travelers head-on.” Alderas’ eyes flashed at this comment, and he stepped forward as though to speak. However, Leandra rested a

hand on his arm.

"My hunting pack was ordered to defend the young ones in the meeting lodge," Silver continued, addressing the crowd once more. "Travelers circled around our forces and attacked us from within Haven. We barely escaped by tunneling underground. With few options, we headed for the Ancestor Tree – the only safe place left in the valley."

Silver hesitated, uncertain of how to continue. Only the faint murmur and chirp of the beasts in the courtyard helped ease the tension. The townsfolk looked conflicted as they stared back and forth between the council and Silver – as though uncertain whether to believe this tale. Beneath this stoic facade, Frank sensed their fear and sorrow, which was slowly morphing into a fuming anger and rage. It was turning to hate. Yet it lacked a target. It was unfocused and blind.

"And your changes, child of the pack?" Leandra asked quietly, gesturing at Silver's darkened hair. "How do you explain your transformation?"

Silver grimaced, her eyes dropping back to the ground. "I was mortally wounded by the travelers during our escape." She glanced at Frank behind her, meeting his gaze. "Frank… Frank saved me. He used the demon's heart to cure my wounds – which has caused the changes you see before you."

Silver raised her eyes to meet the council. "I now carry the heart of the demon in my chest," she said, placing her palm to her heart.

The crowd murmured, humans and creatures stirring. Frank could feel their fear growing, anger simmering just beneath the surface. They had been betrayed, and Silver carried the heart of their betrayer.

But Silver wasn't done with her story.

"That gift came with a cost – even now I hunger for mana," she said, her voice strained. "Yet it was also these changes that allowed us to save Haven and its people," she said, looking back at the crowd.

"Our hunting pack attacked the travelers in the night – those that would see us dead or enslaved. We hunted them in the darkness. Then we laid their bodies to rest beneath the Ancestor Tree – a final death.

"We did… unspeakable things. I am not proud of that. Yet what we did, we did to protect Haven. To protect our people." Silver said, her voice almost pleading.

"I'm sure you believe so," Leandra said, her voice cold and doubt evident in her tone. "Why did the travelers flee Haven?"

Silver grimaced. "We knew we couldn't face them directly – our group was too small. So, we tricked them. We confronted the

travelers' general and used Spider to make them believe they were surrounded and outnumbered. Their forces fled to the east, trying to escape…" Silver trailed off and her eyes clouded as she recalled what they had done.

"Did they escape?" Sthren asked, his words clipped, as though unaccustomed to speaking.

"Only one – as a witness to what happened here and a warning to our enemies. We ran down the rest," Silver replied, shaking off her stupor. "It was a slaughter."

A quiet now hung over the courtyard, only the rustle of leaves breaking the silence.

"Do you expect us to accept this tall tale?" Alderas finally said, his voice booming across the market, colored with his own disbelief.

"It is the truth," Silver said, gritting her teeth.

Alderas' doubt was also reflected in the eyes of the council members and the crowd. They murmured to each other, shuffling uneasily. Their fear was an almost palpable thing now, colored by uncertainty and confusion. They had lost much, and they didn't know who to believe. Haven and its people had only known betrayal. From the cultists. From the demon. And now one of their own stood before them – tainted and corrupted.

The Elder Shifter strode forward, addressing the townsfolk and beasts as much as the pair standing in the center of the courtyard. "Yet you offer little evidence, and even your own story admits that it is you two who endangered the pack. You slew the demon – knowing full well that it protected our town. Then you sought to flee our home instead of standing with its defenders. Would our forces have fallen in the plains if you had stood with us instead of questioning the council?" Alderas demanded.

A murmur rippled through the crowd and Frank saw Silver's hands ball into fists. She was struggling to tamp down on her anger – which would only lend support to her father's words.

"And then there is the matter of your… *corruption*. One of you has not mastered his tainted *shift*, and the other openly admits to harboring the heart of a demon. Many of us fought these men and women ourselves. We are aware of their strength. You expect us to believe that a handful of our own pushed back an army of travelers?

"Or should we instead consider a more plausible explanation. Perhaps you struck a deal? Many of our loved ones are still missing. Perhaps you sold out your own to make a bargain with the travelers," Alderas said, glaring down at them.

"We didn't…" Silver began, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Didn't what?" her father interrupted. "Deceive your own people? You admit to tricking the travelers. That is not the way of the

pack – lies and deceit. We face our foes head-on. No, those are the actions of travelers, of cultists… of a demon," he snapped.

Silver took a step forward, growling softly under her breath. "You claim that I'm lying? After everything that has happened? None of you would be standing here if not for our help," she shot back, waving at the town. "If you don't believe me, then I shall submit to the nightshade flowers."

"Unfortunately, that is not possible," Alderas snapped. "Not after the meeting lodge was burned down – supposedly by travelers."

Silver's ground her teeth together in frustration. Her eyes shone a brilliant sapphire, and Frank could see the dark hair on her arms rise, her sharpened teeth and nails on full display. She looked terrifying – feral. He could also see the reaction of the townsfolk, accusation lingering in their eyes as Alderas finally painted a target for their rage.

"Yes," Alderas said, although it clearly pained him to admit it. "The creature I see before me is not trustworthy. She is *tainted* by the heart of a demon."

In that moment, Frank realized that they would never accept a simple story. Their fear and anger had blinded them. Alderas wouldn't see the truth until it was staring him in the face. In that case, Frank was more than happy to oblige.

He stepped forward and placed a calming hand on Silver's shoulder. She gave him a confused look. "Let me try," he whispered to her. She nodded, once, reluctantly.

Frank then addressed the council. "With all due respect, Elder Shifter, we are not lying. If we had betrayed the town, then why not run? Flee into the mountains?"

He let those questions hang in the air – unanswered and unanswerable.

"We also didn't fight alone. We hunted with the pack," Frank continued, gesturing at the rest of their team. As one, they stepped forward into the clearing and stood beside Frank and Silver. Abigail, Spider, Howl, Runner, and Hoot stood with them. Little Sophie walked up to her older sister and grabbed her hand, the other children lingering around them. They all stood firm, staring at the council.

"And I have more than mastered my *shift*," Frank continued, meeting the Elder Shifter's gaze firmly.

He did not hesitate. Frank's body began to transform, his limbs stretching as his bones cracked and reformed. He felt a flash of burning pain course through his muscles as his body reassembled itself.

Yet it was easier this time – not as painful or as difficult – almost as though his body had been squeezed back into its human

form, contained within that fragile shell by pure force of will. Summoning the *shift* was like releasing a pressure that had been building for hours, his body wanting to retake its true form. It just felt *right*.

Within only seconds, Frank had assumed his *Werewolf Form*. He took a lumbering step forward, the residents of Haven now looking smaller and weaker. With his enhanced sight, he could see that a crimson aura had enveloped the crowd and the council members. Their eyes widened, and many of the townsfolk stepped back.

Even the other animals responded. Birds twittered on their perches, and a few even took flight. The creatures that walked and slithered the ground backed away, growling and hissing at Frank.

"*Fear*," the spirit purred.

Yet Frank didn't sense that same fear from his hunting pack. They looked at him only with respect. He was a predator, but he was one of their own.

"What… what are you?" Alderas bit out.

"I am something new – something different. I am a *Primal Shifter*," Frank growled in response. "The Dragon of Life himself has granted me his blessing and a fragment of his own soul."

Gasps rang out from the crowd, and the council members were simply staring at him now. Even Sthren's mouth hung open.

"The dragon is merely a myth. Yet you claim he spoke to you – a *corrupted* traveler?" Alderas asked, incredulous disgust practically dripping from his voice.

Frank hesitated. His blood-red eyes skimmed the crowd. With his enhanced senses, he saw more clearly now. He saw their fear, their hesitation, and their guilt. This was all a ruse. What they truly wished to do was hide and to point fingers at someone they could blame for disturbing their den. Alderas wished to find an object for his own anger and guilt, even if that was his own daughter.

Frank could feel rage simmering in his veins. They should be *thanking* them. Bending down on one knee in grateful praise. Instead, they sought to find someone to blame for what had happened. Yet these mistakes were their own. It was their own weakness that had led them here – not Frank and not Silver.

These people had forgotten their own strength. They were skeptical even when faced with the obvious – that a handful of their own had toppled an army.

The primal spirit was whispering in Frank's ear now, the message more emotion than concrete thought. It repeated the dragon's message.

This was *wrong*.

Frank looked at the members of the hunting pack that stood

with them. Abigail, Runner, Howl, and Spider stood by his side. Hoot – who had lost more than most – stood tall and proud, his pain-filled eyes glaring at Alderas. Even Sophie refused to back down, her tiny hands balled into fists. He had seen that little girl take down a full-grown player only hours ago.

Frank finally saw the truth of the dragon's words reflected in their steely gaze. It was in the way that they had stood with Frank and Silver against an army and now stood against their own people. The residents of Haven were stronger than this. So much stronger.

In the face of that strength, Frank needed to accept his own role here – the same one the dragon had tried to foist on him. How could he back down now? After everything that they had been through?

"No," Frank said in barely a whisper. He could feel the primal spirit purring in the back of his mind as it considered what he planned to do. His vision was suddenly awash in a brilliant crimson glow.

Frank raised his eyes to look at Alderas. "The dragon didn't merely speak to me. He *summoned* me here. He sent out his spirit into the world looking for a champion, and now I have returned!

"You stand here discussing the evils that have plagued this valley and its people," Frank shouted. He looked toward Alderas. "You bemoan your own weakness and doubt in the strength of others! You point fingers and beat your chest! You cry to the sky as though it can return your dead to you.

"You wish to talk about how we arrived here?" Frank growled. His eyes skimmed across the crowd and council members. "You were tricked by the cultists. And then again by the Beast – duped by a demon. It was your *fear* that made this possible. You kidnapped and sacrificed the travelers. It was your *weakness* that brought this evil down upon Haven. Not of fang or claw, but of *spirit*.

"We came to you with this news and told you what to do," Frank said.

"To run away?" Alderas scoffed. "To let the travelers claim Haven as their own?"

Frank's blood-red eyes focused on him. "No. A simple retreat, to regroup and let us attack the travelers on more even footing. But you would not listen. Your own anger and guilt blinded you to the obvious path. Retreat is not weakness. It is *strength* – a willingness to make hard decisions for the good of the pack.

"Yet we few," Frank continued, gesturing at his hunting pack, "purged this poison. We have not forgotten the old ways. We caused the fields to run red with the blood of our prey and forced them to flee into the forest like rabbits. This is your true strength. This is your true power."

Frank's eyes swept across the crowd. "You seek someone to blame?"

He let that question linger in the air even as his own blood boiled.

"Then blame yourselves," Frank roared.

"Our kind was not meant to hide in a valley or tremble in our nest. We should not shrink from a challenge, too afraid of defeat to even try. We are not meant to be bound and slumber away our lives – fearful of leaving our den. To grow fat, and old, and soft. To die a slow death."

"We are meant to soar. To fight. To hunt. To race across the plains and swim in the oceans. To feel the wind on our skin and the flesh of our prey between our fangs. And when we face stronger prey, we adapt, we grow, we overcome. We claw, scrape, tear, and rend until we force this world to bow before *us*."

Frank could feel a pressure building in his chest, the primal spirit practically screaming in his mind now.

"We are meant to *live*!"

As he spoke that word, the wind suddenly picked up. The ground trembled and the massive branches of the Ancestor Tree swayed overhead, leaves raining down on the crowd.

Looking to the west, Frank saw a rainbow of colors explode up into the sky as the dragon answered his call. The energy swept through the air, a roiling mass of raw emotion. It raced over the rocks and down through the valley. Creatures in its wake stopped, their ears twitching as they heard its call. The trees stilled as though trying to savor each morsel of power that swept across their leaves.

Then it struck the marketplace in a cascade of pure energy.

The beasts lost control first – overwhelmed by the tidal wave of emotion. They raised their heads to the sky, cawing, howling, and snarling as though to vent the overbearing pressure. The residents of Haven soon followed. Their voices rose in a riotous roar of sound that seemed to vibrate the very air.

It was freedom and fear. It was hardship and contentment. It was triumph and defeat. It was the swell and fall of the tides. It was feast and famine. It was a delicate balance and raging chaos. It spoke to something primal at the core of each living thing. And throughout it all, the message was clear. It was a simple direction – devoid of meaning or purpose but singular and all-consuming in its clarity.

LIVE

As quickly as it came, the energy soon faded, dissipating and breaking apart. It left the occupants of the market feeling almost

restless, hunting for that exquisitely painful sensation as though they had lost a loved one.

Silver looked at Frank, and he saw the light shining in her eyes. Her soul had responded to the message, her anxiety and fear disappearing and replaced with excited anticipation. She looked like she wanted to sprint toward the tree line, barely able to hold herself back. She looked wild and beautiful in a way that made Frank's heart lurch. He badly wanted to join her – to take her hand and dash toward the trees.

But now wasn't the time.

Frank forced himself to look at Alderas, the man's gaze confused and uncertain. The rest of the council seemed equally flustered.

"*That* is the dragon's message," Frank said. "*That* is his instruction to his people."

The man shook his head. Already the message had begun to fade, and his fear had crept in once more – although weaker than before. He looked like a man lost, his eyes clouded and searching.

"But what… what will we do now?" Alderas finally asked in a tortured voice. "We have been hunted for so long. The travelers know we are here. How will we protect ourselves?"

Frank couldn't help the involuntary laugh that bubbled to his lips. It was like the lion asking how it should hunt. The spirit echoed his reaction, letting out a hissing chuckle of its own.

"You still don't understand," Frank replied, shaking his head. "You are much stronger than you know. What binds you here – to this place?" Frank asked.

He saw uncertainty in the council's eyes, their reaction mirrored by the townsfolk.

"The answer is *nothing*."

Frank waved at Haven. "You are meant to explore and to grow, not to sit and stagnate. This place was a prison of your own making long before the travelers arrived.

"Your Shifters can adapt to any environment, making their own clothes and food. Your Growers can build entire settlements overnight. You can find refuge anywhere. Your Tamers can scour the skies and the sea as your eyes and ears. Nothing can sneak up on you if only you think to look."

Frank whirled, glaring a challenge at the townsfolk and beating his chest with one clawed fist. "Staying here – inside Haven – only causes you to become complacent and weak. But outside the valley, you can grow stronger. Learn new shifts. Find new creatures. Gain power for yourselves. Explore the farthest reaches of this world. You are blessed with gifts that allow you to thrive *anywhere*. To evolve and

adapt. Use them!”

The dragon’s call had awoken a sleeping hunger in their hearts, and Frank now fed them a purpose – a path. For the first time, faint hope shone in their eyes, and he saw excitement in the way they shuffled in place, as though not content to sit still.

“You don’t need to make a deal with a demon to protect Haven,” Frank said, refocusing his attention on Alderas. “You do not need to hide in your den. We have already shown you that you have the strength to defend yourselves – to reach out into this world and take what you want.”

Frank’s eyes flashed a brilliant crimson. “It’s time to embrace what you truly are. *You* are the real demons.”

Chapter 35 - Bitter-Sweet

Frank sat on a familiar ridge. The grass swayed around him as he looked down on the Ancestor Tree and the lake that rested at the edge of its roots. He knew what really lay below those rocks – a creature of insurmountable power. It was a beast that could even rival the gods themselves. Yet, right now, there was no sign of the dragon. Only a gentle breeze rippled across the lake, and a faint smattering of leaves swirled around him.

The meeting had soon broken up after Frank's speech. No one could try to shift blame after witnessing the dragon's roar and Frank's message. In fact, it was as though a switch had been flipped inside of them. They would still mourn their dead, but death was only the beginning. Life moved on, and the people of Haven were ready to face it with an almost hungry enthusiasm. They had a purpose now, and efforts were already underway to leave the valley and to explore the wider world beyond the mountains.

Afterward, the residents of Haven had approached Silver and the hunting pack, finally whispering their thanks. Frank had quickly found a moment to slip away. He just needed some room to think. The people of Haven may have found clarity, but Frank still felt conflicted.

He wasn't sure of his place now.

These were his people. This was his *real* pack. Some part of him knew that instinctively. He had risen to assume the role that the dragon had tried to push on him – if only for a moment. Yet that moment had passed.

Frank could already feel his thoughts slipping off to a faraway place – thinking about spiraling dark towers and swirling black clouds. He had other responsibilities, to his friends and to himself. The dragon's instruction to him had also been clear. He needed to grow in power. He just wasn't certain if the best way to do that was to follow the pack.

And then there was Silver.

Almost as though his thoughts had summoned her, he felt a gentle hand rest on his shoulder, and he looked over to find Silver settle beside him, her legs crossed. She didn't say anything at first, her eyes taking in the Ancestor Tree as her dark hair whipped in the wind.

He still remembered when her locks had been an ivory white, streaked with veins of silver. He had indeed corrupted her. Frank grimaced as he recalled how he had saved her life. He wished there had been some other way. It wasn't just the physical changes either –

it was the way her own people looked at her. It was their fear and disgust.

They hadn't spoken about it since the attack on the players. However, he could still remember how Silver had reacted when she first realized what he had done – how much she had been changed. The battle had helped ease some of her anger, but it hadn't really gone away. Could she forgive him for what he had done?

"I'm sorry," Frank finally said, breaking the silence.

Silver looked at him in confusion, her bright-blue eyes sparkling. "For what?"

"For the demon's heart," Frank replied, shaking his head. "I didn't want to do it. I knew the cost would be painful. But I… I just couldn't let you die.

"I know this will change the way that the others treat you – that it has *already* changed the way some treat you," he continued, thinking of the look in her father's eyes.

Silver surprised him. She laughed, the sound both startling and pleasant. He couldn't remember a time that he had seen her laugh – genuinely laugh.

She saw the confused look on his face, and she laughed even harder.

Actually, it had been going on now for a while, and Frank was starting to feel stupid – like he was missing some joke at his own expense.

"You really are an idiot," she gasped and rubbed at her eyes. "I might have been surprised and angry at first, and it will take some time to adjust, but I wouldn't trade a change of hair color for my own life."

Frank had to admit that she had a point, a rueful grin on his face. At the same time, he knew that the changes entailed more than that. He had seen her drink his blood to recover from her wounds, and she hadn't just killed those players. Many corpses had been half-eaten before they were buried below the Ancestor Tree.

"You know it was more than that, though," Frank said dryly.

Silver tilted her head, her eyes lingering on the fresh dirt of the graves, the mounds stacked in neat rows. "I guess so." A pause. "It feels strange. It's like there's this hunger in my belly that won't go away – no matter how much I eat. This insatiable craving."

"The hunger is for mana," Frank said softly.

Silver just nodded.

He suspected that would never truly go away. Just like him, Silver was something different now – some hybrid between a shifter and a demon.

"Although, I suppose we can at least still call you Silver," Frank

offered, touching a gray tendril of hair.

Silver shook her head. “Actually, I’m thinking about changing my name. I took that one out of fear and guilt,” she said softly. “That’s not what I want any more.”

“Oh, what were you thinking?” Frank asked, feigning innocent curiosity. “Bloodsucker? Glare Queen?”

Silver punched him in the arm. Hard. Yet he also saw the smile that curled her lips.

“Asshole,” she practically growled at him.

“I don’t know, that one sounds kind of…” Frank began, but trailed off as he saw her glaring at him.

Silver looked away then, her expression sobering. “I was actually thinking… maybe, Ana,” she said, meeting his eyes almost timidly. “At least to a select few people."

“Would I be one of those people?” Frank asked, a twinkle in his eye.

Silver – or Ana – sighed, glaring at him. “You really are an idiot. Maybe that should be *your* pack name,” she offered.

It was Frank’s turn to laugh. “At least you’ve already taught me to respond to it. But I’m not a member of the pack, remember? Corrupted one over here,” Frank said with a grin.

Ana looked at him, her eyes suddenly serious. “No, you are a member of the pack – at least my pack – name or not.”

Frank wasn’t sure how to respond to that or the conviction in her eyes.

“*This one is an acceptable mate*,” the spirit whispered suddenly.

Frank jerked in surprise, his eyes widening.

“*Shut up*,” Frank said back silently.

“*What? Do you deny that you desire this one? You cannot hide your feelings from us*,” the spirit whispered back, its voice taunting. It began showing him images of Ana, a few choice ones that Frank had been purposefully ignoring.

He also couldn’t help but notice the way Ana’s arm brushed his, her fur soft against his skin. He felt a confused blush creep across his cheeks as the spirit conjured more images – this time wondering how far that dark fur had spread across her body.

“*Shut the hell up*,” he said more forcefully. This time, he visualized a plain room and himself grabbing the swirling bundle of shadow he sensed in the back of his head. He tossed the irritating spirit in the room and slammed the mental door shut.

He was met with sudden silence.

Frank realized that Ana was looking at him as though waiting for him to reply.

“Uh, I’m sorry. What was that?” Frank asked.

Ana bit at her lip for a moment. “I, uh, said I had a question.”

“Alright… shoot,” Frank said, confusion wrinkling his brow.

“You might not remember this, but when we escaped the Chasm, Spider whispered something to you,” Ana said softly. Then her sapphire eyes flitted up to his own, uncertainty lingering in her gaze. “What did he say?”

Frank froze. The Grower’s words had troubled him for days afterward, although he still hadn’t really brought himself to accept them – especially since he hadn’t even really come to terms with his own feelings. Yet, despite what he had told the spirit, he couldn’t deny the truth of its words. It represented his suppressed emotions – his rage, anger, and despair. But also his desires. In some ways, that damnable spirit knew him better than he knew himself.

He also vividly remembered what he had said to the spirit before he tried to save Ana. How he had so easily admitted that Ana had stolen his heart. Gazing into her sapphire eyes, he suddenly realized denying those feelings was a losing battle, consequences be damned.

“Um…” Frank coughed to clear his throat. “I guess it seems sort of silly,” he offered, trying to downplay it. “Spider said that you *cared* about me. You just didn’t know how to show it.”

Ana’s eyes widened as she stared back at him, her mouth opening as though she was struggling to find a response. At the same time, he saw a faint red aura peel away from her skin, although the emotion was strange – almost foreign. He sensed a hint of fear, but *something* else, something that resonated with the flutter of his own heart and the queasy feeling in his stomach.

He could practically hear Ana’s heartbeat, and he suddenly had trouble focusing on anything besides her lips. Without realizing it, he had moved forward a few precarious inches. That red aura only grew brighter, tugging him forward with a magnetic force.

“That’s… that’s not so silly,” Ana murmured softly, her eyes locked with his.

She didn’t shy away from him.

In the next instant, their lips touched, and he could feel her – that warmth and softness. She tasted like juniper and spring water – like the mountains themselves. He could also feel something more. He could sense her yearning, the crimson light expanding to envelop them both and causing his blood to simmer in his veins – this time with want.

She kissed him back then, her touch less gentle – now hungry. Demanding. She pressed herself against him, her mouth closed tightly against his own. Her hands drifted to his back, and he felt her sharp nails scratch against his skin, biting almost painfully into his flesh.

Without warning, Ana pulled back, breathing hard and holding a hand to her chest. “I… I’m sorry,” she said.

“What for?” Frank asked in confusion, his mind wheeling, and his body protesting. He couldn’t think of a single complaint right now.

“I’m not sure I can control… control the hunger,” she said, her eyes suddenly clouded as she looked away from him. “It can be overwhelming, and this is only making it worse.

“I might hurt you.”

Frank couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled to his lips.

Although, when Ana looked back at him with stormy eyes, and he saw the hair on her arms rise menacingly, he quickly stopped.

Frank reached for her then, cradling her face with his hand.

“You won’t hurt me. I trust you.”

This time Frank kissed Ana, and he didn’t hold back. His lips pressed against hers, and he held her to him – her small form feeling surprisingly strong. Her nails again raked across his back as she gave in to her desire. In her enthusiasm, he felt her sharp canines nip his lip, the faint coppery taste of blood filling his mouth.

Yet Ana didn’t stop, her tongue ran along the small scratch, and she kissed him even more enthusiastically, Frank feeling the faint tug on his mana. Before he knew what was happening, Ana lunged on top of him, and the two tipped over the edge of the ridge, rolling down the hill – a ball of limbs, and lips, and lust.

When they hit the bottom of the hill, they broke apart, and Ana’s laughter filled the air. In a flash, she was in a crouch, looking at him with those glowing sapphire eyes – her expression challenging and her form tense as though ready to run.

And then she was off, running across the field, her body shimmering with a multi-colored light even as her limbs began to transform. Even contained in its mental prison, Frank felt the primal spirit purr its appreciation. This girl was a wild thing – untamed and challenging him to capture her – if but for a fleeting moment.

Frank only hesitated for a fraction of a second as he watched her. He might need to leave the pack eventually, but not yet. And this wouldn’t be the end of their story. He would find them again – not for the dragon, or for the people of Haven, but for Silver.

In the next instant, Frank was on his feet, his body already beginning to *shift* as he sped across the grassy field, chasing after the blue-eyed demon that had captured his heart.

Chapter 36 - Cathartic

Frank tugged off his headset and lay on his bed for a long moment. His muscles felt stiff, but more than that, they were sore. It took some time to massage out the dull ache that always came with an extended play session. As Frank worked through this process, he couldn't help but notice that his arms and chest both looked and felt more defined, less fat and more muscle resting below his kneading fingers.

It seemed he was growing stronger both in-game and in the real world.

Even as his thoughts returned to AO, he felt conflicted – almost guilty. He hadn't talked to Ana about how long he would be able to stay with the pack, and she had steadfastly refused to discuss the subject. Eventually, he would need to return to the Twilight Throne and to his friends. But at least he had a few days, or weeks in-game, until Jason and Riley would likely need him again.

He didn't plan to waste that time.

Speaking of which, he needed to get the hell up, his bladder and stomach making their demands known. He lifted himself to his feet with a groan, making a brief pit stop in the bathroom before padding down the hall toward the kitchen.

As he passed his sister's room, he noticed the door was cracked open. He also heard cursing followed by a sharp crash – the sound of tinkling glass scattering across the hard surface of the floor.

Concerned, Frank peeked inside.

He found his sister standing over a mess. She had long ago turned a corner of her rather spacious bedroom into a miniature art studio, the floor covered in thick plastic and the furniture speckled with flakes of color. However, she seemed to be in the process of disassembling her studio. She had torn down some of her posters and a half-full trash bag lay beside her.

Rebecca cursed under her breath as she stared at the shattered remains of a paint jar that now rested across half the room, bright-red paint splattered against the thick plastic sheet. The same crimson liquid coated most of her shirt and pants.

"Damn it," she muttered in frustration.

For a moment, Frank considered just moving on down the hall. Rebecca probably wouldn't be receptive to his interruption. However, something in her expression made him pause. Moisture was accumulating at the corners of her eyes as she glared down at the

paint and she sniffed hard, as though she was barely holding back tears.

Before he realized what he was doing, Frank tapped on the door, shifting it open slightly. “Are you alright?” he asked cautiously. “I heard a crash.”

Rebecca whirled to face him, her eyes wide and surprised. As she saw that it was Frank, she turned away quickly, wiping at her face with her sleeve. “I’m fine,” she snapped. “Get the hell out.”

“You don’t look fine,” Frank offered, ignoring her angry demand. “Would you like some help cleaning up?”

“You think I need *your* help?” Rebecca demanded, glaring at him now. Her eyes were red and puffy. “Some fat idiot? Just get the fuck out!”

Frank stared back at her. Usually, he would have gotten angry, probably pushing the feeling aside and slinking to the kitchen – trying to ignore the crashing and cursing from upstairs. However, he felt different now, especially after everything that had happened in Haven. For some reason, her words didn’t faze him like they had before.

He also didn’t have his in-game abilities, but it didn’t take a genius to realize that his sister was upset. He had the feeling she was lashing out at him because he was an easy target – it wasn’t personal. Something else was going on, and he suspected he knew what it was. His previous conversations with both his parents and Rebecca finally clicked in his head, even if the memories felt fuzzy after so long spent inside AO.

As he stared at Rebecca, Frank realized he was just looking at an injured, cornered animal caught in an emotional trap.

So, he did something unexpected.

Frank simply walked into the room and wrapped his arms around Rebecca. She didn’t even have a chance to say anything or fend him off. Before she knew it, Frank was hugging her, oblivious to the paint that stained her clothing and began to seep into his own.

Frank felt her tense, and she punched feebly at his arms and shoulders as she tried to break free. She murmured something into his chest, probably something hateful and nasty, but he didn’t move. Then, after a long moment, his sister began to relax, and he both felt and heard her sobbing into his shirt, her body shuddering.

He wasn’t quite certain how long they stood there like that, but Frank didn’t let go until his sister’s tears stopped, and the trembling subsided. Then he stepped away cautiously, ready for a swinging fist or a well-aimed foot. When no attack seemed to be imminent, he swiped at a box of nearby tissues and handed one to her.

“Feeling better?” Frank asked quietly.

“A little,” Rebecca muttered. She wouldn’t quite look at him as

she wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"Want to tell me what's wrong now?" Frank asked quietly.

Rebecca bit at her lip, a scowl crossing her face. "I…" she began before hesitating, glancing at Frank as though searching for something. Yet he simply waited patiently, his expression neutral. "It was the art fair…" she muttered finally, looking away.

It was strange. Only a few days ago, he would have thought that Rebecca was immune to his parents' judgmental bullshit and could take a single defeat in stride. She had always been the "golden child." Yet, as he looked at her, he felt his perspective suddenly shift. Maybe he had misjudged just how much pressure came with winning all the time. That must become the norm, and a failure might hurt that much more.

"I take it that it didn't go well?" Frank offered.

Rebecca huffed. "I didn't place with any of my pieces."

Frank just waited. That explained why she had been avoiding their parents. Not that he blamed her. Despite their weird reaction to him talking about Silver and their sudden approval lately, they were normally a bottomless well of judgment and expectation.

"Sarah won multiple awards," Rebecca muttered. "And she just *had* to rub it in my face, flaunting them around. She even had a party and everything – invited most of the class."

Her eyes flitted across the half-destroyed room. "It's just fucking stupid. I don't even know why I bother…"

"I do," Frank interrupted suddenly, startling her into looking at him. "It's because you are good at this. Really, really good."

She didn't look like she believed him.

"Come on, you didn't win *one competition* in a field that is notoriously subjective. Hell, Sarah's parents probably made some crazy donation to the school to get her those awards." Rebecca tilted her head but still didn't look convinced.

"Besides," Frank continued, "it's not like you don't usually win every freaking category. You gotta throw the other people a bone occasionally. Give them a little hope of beating you." A teasing smile tugged at Frank's lips.

He saw a half-hearted grin on Rebecca's face now. Then she grimaced as she looked at the damage she had caused to her little studio. But the sadness and self-recrimination had faded somewhat – whether from the crying or Frank's words, he couldn't be sure.

Rebecca looked back at him, but her gaze was now fixed on his chest. "You're a mess," she said, gesturing at Frank's clothes. He was now covered in splotches of red paint and half-dried tears.

He let out an amused snort. "You aren't looking so hot yourself. You look sort of like you went on an artistic rampage… maybe

slaughtered half your art class. I'm guessing you started with Sarah…"

This earned him a laugh – a genuine one.

"Why don't I help you clean up?" Frank offered, waving at the room.

"No," Rebecca said curtly and then amended herself when she saw Frank give her a quizzical expression. "I can handle it myself. I caused it, and I should take care of it. Besides, you probably need a shower now," she said with a small grin.

It felt weird for his sister to joke with him, but Frank wasn't about to second-guess it. "Alright then, just call me if you need me!"

He turned to leave.

"Frank?"

He looked back at Rebecca. "Uh, thanks… for like talking to me and not being judgy," she said, looking distinctly uncomfortable and maybe just a bit embarrassed.

"Anytime," he said with a smile. Then Frank stepped out of the room.

Rebecca stood staring at the empty doorway for a long moment even after her brother had disappeared, a confused look etched on her face. She couldn't place what it was exactly, but Frank had acted different – really different. Although, it was hard for her to identify exactly what had changed. She could have also sworn his arms felt more solid as they had encircled her, but that was stupid, wasn't it?

She shook her head to clear her thoughts, returning her attention to the mess she had made. "Damn it, this is going to take forever to clean up," she muttered.

* * *

It took Frank a little longer to get some food than he had been planning. Mostly because he had to strip his paint-stained clothes and take a quick shower. However, sometime later, he had managed to score a snack from the kitchen and shuffle into the living room. Buddy immediately showed up, having been alerted to the smell of food cooking, and he now lay curled against Frank's side, staring at his plate with a longing expression.

As soon as Frank settled onto the couch, a screen flickered into existence along the opposing wall. The house's AI registered Frank's Core, and the screen immediately broke apart into several panes, identifying the several channels he watched frequently. His mouth was full, so he focused on a single pane. His selection soon enlarged to fill the frame as the house's AI tracked his eye movement.

“Hello, and welcome back to Vermillion Live!” a young man announced.

The camera shifted to his co-anchor, and she faced the camera, her expression serious. “We have interrupted our usual stream for some breaking news. At this point, I’m sure many of you have heard rumors about the raid in the mountains north of the Twilight Throne. The gossip has really been flying over the last 24 hours.”

The other reporter jumped in, the camera panning back out. “Well, you don’t need to rely on rumors any longer. We are bringing the *full* story to you now.”

He paused for a second, taking a deep breath and letting the tension build. “It seems that a guild, the Knights of the New Republic, attacked an NPC village in the northern mountains. Although the reason for the attack isn’t clear, what is apparent is that things didn’t go quite the way they were expecting.”

The young woman beside him nodded. “The guild originally managed to capture and imprison the townsfolk. However, they were attacked during the in-game evening. Not only did many of the players die, but they also discovered that their characters had been *permanently deleted*.”

“To make matters worse, the players reported that they encountered someone familiar during the battle. The player known as Frank – the left hand of the Regent of the Twilight Throne – was reportedly present during the battle. We can now confirm that this is true.” The anchor waved behind him, and a still image filled the back wall.

Frank saw himself – or at least his *Werewolf Form* – staring back. He was perched on a rooftop, an orange haze illuminating the night sky behind him as Haven burned. His body was nearly invisible in the dark shadow of the roof, but his glowing crimson eyes were focused on the camera, and his name and guild tag floated above his head.

Shit, Frank thought, worry suddenly simmering in his stomach.

“At this point, it isn’t clear if the Twilight Throne was officially involved in the battle or if Frank was acting on his own,” the anchor continued.

The pair glanced at each other before turning back to the camera. The young woman chose her words carefully. “We know that many of you are questioning whether this was some sort of hack or abuse of the game system. We were able to confirm with Cerillion Entertainment’s team that this wasn’t the case. Frank did not abuse or manipulate the game system. It appears that the deletion of the characters was an event-specific interaction, and the development team is already looking into ways to patch and limit this in the

future."

"So, you don't need to worry too much about losing your character going forward," the man beside her offered. "This mechanic will likely not affect the vast majority of the player population. However, the in-game system is dynamic, so this is an example for the rest of the players. Be careful. This isn't a game where you can charge in blindly."

The anchor grimaced before continuing, "Although, this probably isn't comforting to those that died in the conflict. They also don't appear to be ready to bury the hatchet, so to speak. The guild has taken to social media and crowd-funding sites, encouraging others to hunt down Frank. As a result, the real-world bounty on Frank's head has risen to almost $15,000, putting him in pretty close competition with Jason himself."

Frank's eyes widened. "What the…?" he murmured, trailing off. The pit in his stomach had definitely expanded. That was a lot of money…

"You might be asking why anyone would pay that kind of money to kill someone in-game," the woman news anchor offered, her expression serious. "Well, we figured it might be easier to show you. We were able to get our hands on some exclusive in-game footage of the encounter. This has never been seen before – even by our team here at Vermillion Live.

"So, let's see what exactly those players were facing."

The pair both turned to face the far wall, the image of Frank disappearing and replaced by inky darkness as the screen filled the camera.

The darkness soon resolved on a player racing through a dark forest as though the devil himself was hot on his heels. A small tag in the corner of the screen indicated that they were watching footage from a player named Paul. His breath came in ragged gasps, and the camera bobbed and weaved as he ran. Beside him, other players could be seen running through the trees, summoning small balls of light or tendrils of flame in a vain attempt to push back at the darkness.

Suddenly, a shrill scream echoed through the forest. Paul didn't stop running, only sparing a frantic glance over his shoulder. There was nothing but shadows and trees. He turned back and kept pumping his legs as hard and as fast as he could.

There was a flash of movement in Paul's peripheral vision and an orb of light winked out of existence. The camera shifted as the player tried to turn to look. Yet only an indistinct dark blur was visible on the screen.

"Oh, fuck," he gasped and kept running.

More and more lights winked out around him, followed by

choked-off screams of pain. A low growl came from the trees, but it was hard to place the location. At the same time, the group UI in the corner of the player's vision kept flashing, player icons turning gray at a rapid pace.

Then something crashed down from the trees above, landing on a woman running a few yards away. Paul had the foresight to dive behind a tree, hiding from sight and peeking around the trunk. The downed player must have been a mage because a bolt of lightning arced through the air, slamming into *something*. The brief light soon illuminated a massive black wolf, the energy arcing up and over its body as it spasmed. The blast tore away the skin along the wolf's side, revealing burnt and bloody flesh.

It was injured, but definitely not dead.

As the lightning faded, the beast turned its attention to the mage below it. Paul could see that there was a ravaged tear in the wolf's side, blood dripping onto the ground. However, the beast ignored the wound, stalking toward the woman and its sapphire eyes flashing.

The player let out a scream as the beast's jaws snapped shut. However, the wolf didn't just kill the player – it *ate* her. It ripped the woman's arm free with a vicious jerk, flinging the player a few feet away. Then the creature gnawed on the limb. Surprisingly, the wolf's wound swiftly began to knit together as it feasted on the player's flesh and blood.

At the same time, the injured player tried to drag herself away, moving ever-so-slowly. Her eyes were wide and bulging, her panic on full display. The wolf seemed to sense that its prey was escaping and gave up the arm, launching forward in a single bound and its fangs soon diving into the woman's stomach in a frenzy of blood. Her screams filled the night air, ending abruptly as her life finally fled her, the player's icon winking out.

"Oh, shit," Paul whispered. "Gods, help me."

"There are no gods here," something growled from behind Paul. He turned to find a hulking beast hovering behind him. It was at least nine feet tall with thickly muscled limbs covered in dark hair, and jagged claws that arced away from its fingers. Yet the most startling feature was its eyes. They glowed an unholy crimson.

The player inspected the beast and the name Frank <Original Sin> hovered above its head – the only indication that this *monster* was human.

"Hey, you don't have to do this, man," the player said, holding up his hands. "We can work something out."

Frank simply laughed, the sound harsh and guttural. Realizing that his enemy wasn't going to see reason, Paul tried to fight back,

attempting to draw his weapon. However, the beast lunged forward in a blazing display of speed, grabbing Paul's arm and snapping it like a twig, ivory bone jutting from the wound.

Before Paul could scream, another pair of claws clenched around his neck, pulling him off his feet. The beast yanked him closer, its blood-red eyes hovering in front of the camera.

"There will be no mercy," Frank growled. Then his fangs flashed forward, and darkness settled across the screen.

Almost instantly, the display centered back on the two news anchors in the Vermillion Live studio. It seemed they hadn't anticipated the abrupt scene change. They looked startled, their eyes wide as they stared at the screen along the back wall, before turning slowly to face the camera again.

"Um…" the woman said, coughing to clear her throat and glancing at her co-anchor.

"That was… something," the man said.

"What even was that ability?" the woman whispered to the man beside her, her voice barely audible. "Did he just eat him?"

The other reporter just shook his head, trying to refocus on the camera. "I guess we know what those players encountered in the mountains. It's also clear that Frank is incredibly dangerous. Any players that run into him in-game are advised to exercise extreme caution."

Frank started to tune out the conversation. His gaze lingered on the still image behind the anchors. A pair of glowing red eyes hovered in the darkness.

He vaguely remembered doing that but seeing it from the other side was… different. That thing – that beast – onscreen was terrifying. And yet his worry had faded as he watched the scene. Maybe a few days ago, he would have been nervous about the game world hunting him. But now, that battle had reminded him of the message he had delivered to the residents of Haven. He could feel adrenaline surge through his veins as he remembered the dragon's roar cascading down through the valley.

Only prey were afraid. And Frank was a predator now. A small ember of triumph flickered to life in his chest. Now *this* was finally on par with Jason and Riley.

An excited smile began to tug at Frank's lips as he stared at that image. It just made him want to log back in and get to work. He still had a long way to go. Just as he had urged the people of Haven, he planned to continue to grow, to evolve, to adapt. He would tear, scrape, and rend until he claimed his rightful place atop a mountain of corpses. Until the game world trembled when his name was spoken.

This was only the beginning.

The End

Thank you for reading!

I hope you enjoyed the story! I suspect we may see more of Silver and the druids in the future… This storyline doesn't feel finished – at least, not yet.

If you enjoyed this, then I may have something cool for you guys soon. I've already started working on the fire avatar's story. He is just… freaking awesome. I can't wait to show you all what's in store next!

Please leave a review!

I can't overstate how important these reviews are to ensure other people get a chance to read my stories. I would also love to hear your thoughts – positive, negative, or anything in-between.

Please feel free to email me directly at tbagwell33@gmail.com if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions. If you see any errors, please let me know, and I will fix them immediately!

For all the latest info on my writing projects, check out my blog, and sign up for my newsletter. We also have an awesome Facebook group and Discord server if you want to hang out with fellow members of <Original Sin>. We do regular giveaways, and this is a really cool group of people. If you would like to help support me, please feel free to stop by my Patreon – where I typically publish early chapters of my latest work.

Finally, if you want to find new books or talk about other Gamelit/ LitRPG, feel free to check out this group or this group.

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